

NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

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NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

CHAPTER ONE

UNCLE AND NEPHEW

R. RALPH NICKLEBY sat in his private office one morning, ready dressed to walk abroad. He wore a sprinkling of powder upon his head, as if to make himself look more benevolent; but if that were his purpose, he would perhaps have done better to powder his countenance also, for there was something in its very wrinkles, and in his cold, restless eye, which seemed to tell of cunning that would announce itself in spite of him.

Mr. Nickleby closed an account book which lay on his desk, and, throwing himself back in his chair, gazed with an air of abstraction through the dirty window. Some London houses have a melancholy little plot of ground behind them, usually fenced in by four high whitewashed walls, and frowned upon by stacks of chimneys. It was into a place of this kind that Mr. Ralph Nickleby gazed, as he sat with his hands in his pockets looking out of the window. He had fixed his eyes upon a distorted fir tree, planted by some former tenant in a tub that had once been painted green, and left there, years before, to rot away piecemeal. There was nothing very inviting in the object, but Mr. Nickleby was in a brown study, and sat contemplating the tree with far greater attention than, in a more conscious mood, he would have deigned to bestow upon the rarest exotic. At length, his eyes wandered to a dirty little window on the left, through which the face of his clerk was dimly visible, and that worthy chancing to look up, he beckoned him to attend.

In obedience to this summons the clerk got off the high stool (to which he had communicated a high polish by countless gettings on and off), and presented himself in Mr. Nickleby's room. He was a tall man of middle age, with two goggle eyes whereof one was a fixture, a rubicund nose, a cadaverous face, and a suit of clothes (if the term be allowable when they suited him not at all) much the worse for wear, very much too small, and placed upon such a short allowance of buttons that it was marvellous how he contrived to keep them on.

"Was that half-past twelve, Noggs?" said Mr. Nickleby, in a sharp and grating voice.

"Not more than five-and-twenty-minutes by the—" Noggs was going to add "public-house clock," but recollected himself, and substituted "regular time."

"I am going to London Tavern this morning," said Mr. Nickleby.

"Public meeting?" inquired Noggs.

Mr. Nickleby nodded. "I expect a letter from the solicitor in regard to that mortgage of Ruddle's. If it comes at all, it will be here by the two o'clock delivery. I shall leave the city about that time and walk to Charing-Cross on the left-hand side of the way; if there are any letters, come and meet me, and bring them with you."

Noggs nodded; and as he nodded, there came a ring at the office bell. The master looked up from his papers, and the clerk calmly remained in a stationary position.

"The bell," said Noggs, as though in explanation. "At home?"

"Yes."

Noggs went to the door, whence he presently returned, ushering in, by the name of Mr. Bonney, a gentleman in a violent hurry.

"My dear Mr. Nickleby," said the gentleman, taking off a white hat which was so full of papers that it would scarcely stick upon his head, "there is not a moment to lose; I have a cab at the door. Sir Matthew Pupker takes the chair, and three members of Parliament are positively coming."

"It seems to promise pretty well," said Mr. Nickleby, whose

deliberate manner was strongly opposed to the vivacity of the other man of business.

"Pretty well!" echoed Mr. Bonney. "It is the finest idea that was ever started. 'United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet Baking and Punctual Delivery Company. Capital, five millions, in five hundred thousand shares of ten pounds each.' The very name will get the shares up to a premium in ten days."

"And when they *are* at a premium," said Mr. Ralph Nickleby, smiling.

"When they are, you know what to do with them as well as any man alive, and how to back quietly out at the right time," said Mr. Bonney, slapping the capitalist familiarly on the shoulder. "By the by, what a *very* remarkable man that clerk of yours is."

"Yes, poor devil!" replied Ralph, drawing on his gloves. "But Newman Noggs kept his horses and hounds once."

"Aye, aye," said the other carelessly.

"Yes," continued Ralph, "and not many years ago either; but he squandered his money, invested it, anyhow, borrowed at interest, and in short made first a thorough fool of himself and then a beggar. He took to drinking and had a touch of paralysis, and then came here to borrow a pound, as in his better days I had——"

"Done business with him," said Mr. Bonney, with a meaning look.

"Just so," replied Ralph. "I couldn't lend it, you know, but as I wanted a clerk just then, I took him out of charity, and he has remained with me ever since. He is a little mad, I think," said Mr. Nickleby, calling up a charitable mood "but he is useful to me—poor creature, useful enough."

The kind-hearted gentleman omitted to add that Newman Noggs served him for rather less than the usual wages of a boy of thirteen; and likewise failed to mention that his eccentric fewness of words rendered him especially valuable in a place where much business was done of which it was desirable no mention should be made out of doors. The other gentleman was plainly impatient to be gone,

however, and as they hurried into the hackney cabriolet immediately afterwards, perhaps Mr. Nickleby forgot to mention circumstances so unimportant.

At the public meeting which the pair were starting to attend, a great deal of apparent enthusiasm was produced by the speeches of Sir Matthew Pupker and the three eloquent members of Parliament, and a petition to the House of Commons in favor of the United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Punctual Delivery Company was agreed upon. After the meeting had adjourned with acclamation Mr. Ralph Nickleby and the other directors went to the office to lunch at the company's expense. This business having been dispatched, Mr. Nickleby took a cordial farewell of his fellow speculators, and bent his steps westward in unwonted good humor. As he passed Saint Paul's he stepped aside into a doorway to set his watch, and with his hands on the key and his eye on the cathedral dial, was intent upon so doing, when a man suddenly stopped before him. It was Newman Noggs.

"Ah! Newman," said Mr. Nickleby, "the letter about the mortgage has come, has it? I thought it would."

"Wrong," replied Newman.

"What! and nobody called respecting it?"

Noggs shook his head.

"What *has* come, then?" inquired Mr. Nickleby.

"This," said Newman, drawing a sealed letter slowly from his pocket. "Postmark, Strand, black wax, black border, woman's hand, C. N. in the corner."

"Black wax?" said Mr. Nickleby, glancing at the letter. "I know something of that hand, too. Newman, I shouldn't be surprised if my brother were dead."

Mr. Nickleby took the letter from his assistant, opened it, read it, and put it in his pocket.

"It is as I expected, Newman," said Mr. Nickleby. He is dead. Dear me! Well, that's a sudden thing. I shouldn't have thought it, really." With these touching expressions of sorrow, Mr. Nickle-

by turned upon his way, and walked slowly westward with his hands behind him.

"Children alive?" inquired Noggs, in a low voice.

"Why, that's the very thing," replied Mr. Nickleby, as though his thoughts were about them at that moment. "They are both alive."

"Both!" repeated Newman Noggs.

"And the widow, too," added Mr. Nickleby, "and all three in London, confound them; all three here, Newman."

Newman fell a little behind his master, and his face was curiously twisted as by a spasm; but whether of paralysis, or grief, or inward laughter, nobody but himself could possibly explain.

"Go home!" said Mr. Nickleby, after they had walked a few paces: looking round at the clerk as if he were his dog. The words were scarcely uttered when Newman darted across the road, slunk among the crowd, and disappeared in an instant.

"Reasonable, certainly!" muttered Mr. Nickleby to himself, as he walked on, "very reasonable! My brother never did anything for me, and I never expected it; the breath is no sooner out of his body than I am to be looked to, as the support of a great hearty woman and a grown boy and girl. What are they to me! I never saw them!"

Full of these, and many other reflections of a similar kind, Mr. Nickleby made the best of his way to the Strand, and, referring to his letter as if to ascertain the number of the house he wanted, he stopped at a private door about half-way down that crowded street.

A miniature painter lived there, for there was a large gilt frame screwed upon the street-door, in which were displayed, upon a black velvet ground, two portraits of naval dress coats with faces looking out of them and telescopes attached.

Mr. Nickleby gave a double knock, which, having been thrice repeated, was answered by a servant girl with an uncommonly dirty face.

"Is Mrs. Nickleby at home, girl?" demanded Ralph Nickleby.

"Name ain't Nickleby," said the girl, "La Creevy, you mean."

Mr. Nickleby looked very indignant at the handmaid on being thus corrected, and demanded with much asperity what she meant, which she was about to state, when a female voice proceeding from a perpendicular staircase at the end of the passage, inquired who was wanted.

"Mrs. Nickleby," said Ralph.

"It's the second floor, Hannah," said the same voice.

Climbing up a perpendicular flight, composed with great mechanical ingenuity of nothing but corner stairs, Mr. Ralph Nickleby stopped to take breath on the landing, when he was overtaken by the handmaid, whom the politeness of Miss La Creevy had dispatched to announce him, and who had apparently been making a variety of unsuccessful attempts since their last interview, to wipe her dirty face upon an apron much dirtier.

"What name?" asked the girl.

"Nickleby," replied Ralph.

"Oh! Mrs. Nickleby," said the girl, throwing open the door, "here's Mr. Nickleby."

A lady in deep mourning rose as Mr. Nickleby entered, but did not appear capable of advancing to meet him, and leant upon the arm of a slight but very beautiful girl of about seventeen, who had been sitting beside her. A youth, who appeared a year or two older, stepped forward and saluted Ralph as uncle.

"Oh," growled Ralph, with an ill-favored frown, "you are Nicholas, I suppose.

"That is my name," replied the youth.

"Put down my hat," said Ralph, imperiously. "Well, ma'am, how do you do? You must bear up against sorrow, ma'am, I always do. You didn't mention in your letter what my brother's complaint was, ma'am."

"The doctor could attribute it to no particular disease," said Mrs. Nickleby, shedding tears. "We have too much reason to fear that he died of a broken heart."



Ralph Nickleby calls on his poor relations.—Page 8

"Pooh!" said Ralph, "there's no such thing. I can understand a man's dying of a broken neck, or suffering from a broken arm, a broken head, a broken leg, or a broken nose; but a broken heart!—nonsense, it's the cant of the day. If a man can't pay his debts, he dies of a broken heart, and his widow's a martyr."

"Some people, I believe, have no hearts to break," observed Nicholas, quietly.

"How old is this boy, for God's sake?" inquired Ralph, wheeling back in his chair, and surveying his nephew from head to foot with intense scorn.

"Nicholas is very nearly nineteen," replied his mother.

"Nineteen, eh!" said Ralph, "and what do you mean to do for your bread, sir?"

"Not to live upon my mother," replied Nicholas, his heart swelling as he spoke.

"You'd have little enough to live upon if you did," retorted the uncle, eyeing him contemptuously.

"Whatever it be," said Nicholas, flushed with anger, "I shall not look to you to make it more."

"Nicholas, my dear, recollect yourself," remonstrated Mrs. Nickleby.

"Dear Nicholas, pray," urged the young lady.

"Hold your tongue sir," said Ralph. "Upon my word! Fine beginnings, Mrs. Nickleby—fine beginnings."

Mrs. Nickleby made no other reply than entreating Nicholas by a gesture to keep silent; and the uncle and nephew looked at each other for some seconds without speaking. The face of the old man was stern, hard-featured, and forbidding; that of the young one, open, handsome, and ingenuous. The old man's eye was keen with the twinklings of avarice and cunning; the young man's bright with the light of intelligence and spirit. His figure was somewhat slight, but manly and well-formed; and, apart from all the grace of youth and comeliness, there was an emanation from the warm young heart in his look and bearing which kept the old man down.

However striking such a contrast as this may be to lookers on, none ever feel it with half the keenness or acuteness of perfection with which it strikes to the very soul of him whose inferiority it marks. It galled Ralph to the heart's core, and he hated Nicholas from that hour.

"Well, ma'am," said Ralph, impatiently, "the creditors have administered, you tell me, and there's nothing left for you?"

"Nothing," replied Mrs. Nickleby.

"And you spent what little money you had in coming all the way to London to see what I could do for you?" pursued Ralph.

"I hoped," faltered Mrs. Nickleby, "that you might have an opportunity of doing something for your brother's children. It was his dying wish that I should appeal to you in their behalf."

"Are you willing to work, sir?" Ralph inquired, frowning on his nephew.

"Of course I am," replied Nicholas haughtily.

"Then see here, sir," said his uncle. "This caught my eye this morning, and you may thank your stars for it."

With this exordium, Mr. Ralph Nickleby took a newspaper from his pocket, and after unfolding it, read as follows:

"EDUCATION:—At Mr. Wackford Squeer's Academy, Dotheboys Hall, at the delightful village of Dotheboys, near Greta Bridge in Yorkshire, youth are boarded, clothed, booked, furnished with pocket money, provided with all necessaries, instructed in all languages, living and dead, mathematics, orthography, geometry, astronomy, trigonometry, the use of the globes, algebra, single stick (if required), writing, arithmetic, fortification, and every other branch of classical literature. Terms, twenty guineas per annum. No extras, no vacations, and diet unparalleled. Mr. Squeers is in town, and is to be seen daily from one till four at the *Saracen's Head*, Snow Hill.

N. B.—An able assistant wanted. Salary five pounds annually. A Master of Arts would be preferred."

"There," said Ralph, folding the paper again. "Let him get that situation, and his fortune is made."

"But he is not a Master of Arts," said Mrs. Nickleby.

"That," replied Ralph, "I think can be got over."

"But the salary is so small and it is such a long way off, uncle," faltered Kate.

"Hush, Kate, my dear," interposed Mrs. Nickleby; "your uncle must know best."

"I say," repeated Ralph, tartly, "let him get that situation, and his fortune is made. If he don't like it, let him get one for himself. Without friends, money, recommendation, or knowledge of business of any kind, let him find honest employment in London which will keep him in shoe leather, and I'll give him a thousand pounds. At least," said Mr. Ralph Nickleby, checking himself, "I would if I had it."

"Poor fellow!" said the young lady. "Oh! uncle, must we be separated so soon?"

"Don't tease your uncle with questions when he is thinking only for our good, my love," said Mrs. Nickleby. "Nicholas, my dear, I wish you would say something."

"Yes, mother, yes," said Nicholas, who had hitherto remained silent and absorbed in thought. "If I am fortunate enough to be appointed to this post, sir, for which I am so imperfectly qualified, what will become of those I leave behind?"

"Your mother and sister, sir," replied Ralph, "will be provided for, in that case (not otherwise), by me."

"Then," said Nicholas, starting up gaily, and wringing his uncle's hand, "I am ready to do anything you wish me. Let us try our fortune with Mr. Squeers at once; he can but refuse."

"He won't do that," said Ralph. "He will be glad to have you on my recommendation. Make yourself of use to him, and you'll rise to be a partner in the establishment in no time. Bless me, only think! if he were to die, why your fortune's made at once."

This simple family, born and bred in retirement and wholly unacquainted with what is called the world, mingled their tears together at the thought of their first separation; and, this first gush of feeling

over, were proceeding to dilate with all the buoyancy of untried hope on the bright prospects before them, when Mr. Ralph Nickleby suggested that if they lost time, some more fortunate candidate might deprive Nicholas of the stepping stone to fortune which the advertisement pointed out, and so undermine all their air-built castles. This timely reminder effectually stopped the conversation. Nicholas having carefully copied the address of Mr. Squeers, the uncle and nephew issued forth together in quest of that accomplished gentleman.

CHAPTER TWO

A GRAND OPENING FOR NICHOLAS

R. SQUEERS was standing by one of the coffee-room fireplaces of the *Saracen's Head Inn*. Mr. Squeers was not prepossessing in appearance. He had but one eye, and popular prejudice runs in favor of two. The blank side of his face was much wrinkled and puckered up, which gave him a very sinister appearance, especially when he smiled, at which times his expression bordered closely on the villainous.

In a corner of the room near Mr. Squeers was a very small deal trunk, tied round with a scanty piece of cord; and on the trunk was perched—his laceup half-boots and corduroy trousers dangling in the air—a diminutive boy, with his shoulders drawn up to his ears and his hands planted on his knees, who glanced timidly at the schoolmaster from time to time, with evident dread and apprehension. At length he gave a violent sneeze.

“Halloa, sir!” growled the schoolmaster, turning round. “What is that, sir?”

“Nothing, please sir,” said the little boy.

"Nothing, sir!" exclaimed Mr. Squeers.

"Please, sir, I sneezed," rejoined the boy, trembling till the little trunk shook under him.

"Oh! sneezed, did you?" retorted Mr. Squeers. "Then what did you say 'nothing' for, sir?"

In default of a better answer to this question, the little boy immediately screwed a couple of knuckles into each of his eyes and began to cry, wherefore Mr. Squeers knocked him off the trunk with a blow on one side of his face, and knocked him on again with a blow on the other.

"Wait till I get you down to Yorkshire, my young gentleman," said Mr. Squeers, "and I'll then give you the rest. Will you hold that noise, sir?"

"Ye—ye—yes," sobbed the little boy, rubbing his face very hard.

"Then do so at once, sir," said Squeers. "Do you hear?"

"Mr. Squeers," said a waiter, looking in at this juncture; "here's a gentleman asking for you at the bar."

"Show the gentleman in, Richard," said Mr. Squeers, in a soft voice.

Ralph Nickleby presented himself, closely followed by Nicholas. "There was an advertisement of yours in the papers this morning," said Ralph.

"There was, sir. This way if you please," said Squeers. "Be seated, won't you?"

"Why, I think I will," replied Ralph, suiting the action to the word, and placing his hat on the table before him. "This is my nephew, sir, Mr. Nicholas Nickleby."

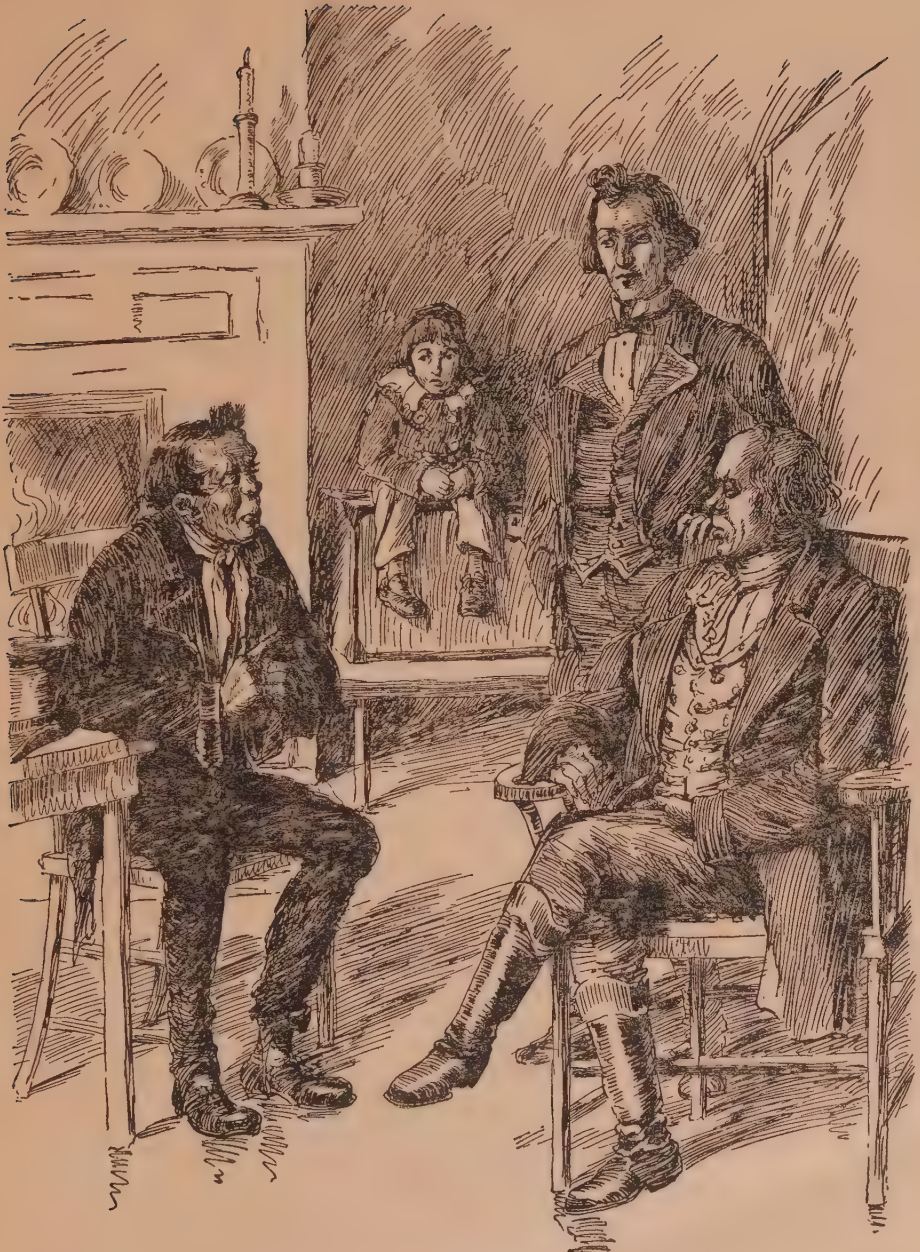
"How do you do, sir?" said Squeers.

Nicholas bowed and said that he was well, and seemed very much astonished at the outward appearance of the proprietor of Dotheboys Hall: as indeed he was.

"You have advertised for an assistant, sir?" said Ralph.

"Precisely so," answered Squeers.

"And you really want one?"



Mr. Squeers engages Nicholas.—Page 17

"Certainly," answered Squeers.

"Here he is!" said Ralph. "My nephew Nicholas, hot from school, with everything he learnt there fermenting in his head and nothing fermenting in his pocket, is just the man you want."

"I am afraid," said Squeers, perplexed with an application from a youth of Nicholas' figure, "I am afraid the young man won't suit."

"I fear, sir," said Nicholas, addressing Mr. Squeers, "that you object to my youth, and to my not being a Master of Arts?"

"The absence of a college degree is an objection," replied Squeers, looking as grave as he could.

"Look here, sir," said Ralph; "I'll put this matter in its true light in two seconds."

"If you will have the goodness," rejoined Squeers.

"This is a boy, or a youth, or a lad, or a young man, or a hobbledoy, or whatever you like to call him, of eighteen or nineteen, or thereabouts. His father is dead, he is wholly ignorant of the world, has no resources whatever, and wants to do something," said Mr. Ralph Nickleby. "I recommend him to this splendid establishment of yours as an opening which will lead him to fortune if he turns it to proper account. Do you see that?"

"Everybody must see that," replied Squeers.

"I do, of course," said Nicholas, eagerly.

"He does, of course, you observe," said Ralph, in the same dry, hard manner. "If any caprice of temper should induce him to cast aside this golden opportunity before he has brought it to perfection, I consider myself absolved from extending any assistance to his mother and sister. Look at him, and think of the use he may be to you in half a dozen ways! Now, the question is, whether, for some time to come, at all events, he won't serve your purpose better than twenty of the kind of people you would get under ordinary circumstances. Isn't that a question for consideration?"

"Yes, it is," replied Squeers, answering a nod of Ralph's head with a nod of his own.

"Good!" rejoined Ralph. "Let me have two words with you."

The two were had apart; in a couple of minutes Mr. Wackford Squeers announced that Mr. Nicholas Nickleby was, from that moment, thoroughly nominated to, and installed in, the office of first assistant master at Dotheboys Hall.

"At eight o'clock to-morrow morning, Mr. Nickleby," said Mr. Squeers, "the coach starts. You must be here at a quarter before, as we take some boys with us."

"Certainly, sir," replied Nicholas.

"And your fare down, I have paid," growled Ralph. "So, you'll have nothing to do but keep yourself warm."

Here was another instance of his uncle's generosity! Nicholas felt his unexpected kindness so much that he could scarcely find the fit words to thank him; indeed, he had not found half enough, when they took leave of the schoolmaster, and emerged from the *Saracen's Head's* gateway.

"I shall be here in the morning to see you off," said Ralph. "No skulking!"

"Thank you, sir" replied Nicholas; "I shall never forget your kindness."

"Take care you don't, replied his uncle. "You had better go home now, and pack up what you have got to pack. Do you think you could find your way to Golden Square first?"

"Certainly," said Nicholas, "I can easily inquire."

"Leave these papers with my clerk, then," said Ralph, producing a small parcel, "and tell him to wait till I come home."

Nicholas cheerfully undertook the errand, and bidding his worthy uncle an affectionate farewell, which the warm-hearted old gentleman acknowledged by a growl, hastened away.

He found Golden Square in due course. Mr. Noggs, who had just stepped out for a minute or two to the public-house, was opening the door with a latch-key as he reached the steps.

"What's that?" asked Noggs, pointing to the parcel.

"Papers from my uncle," replied Nicholas, "and you're to have the goodness to wait till he comes home, if you please."

"Uncle!" cried Noggs.

"Mr. Nickleby," said Nicholas, in explanation.

"Come in," said Newman.

It was a great exertion for Newman Noggs, and nobody knows to this day how he ever came to make it, the other party being wholly unknown to him, but he drew a long breath and actually said, out loud, without once stopping, that if the young gentleman did not object to tell, he should like to know what his uncle was going to do for him.

Nicholas had not the least objection in the world, but on the contrary was rather pleased to have an opportunity of talking on the subject which occupied his thoughts; so, he sat down, and entered into a fervent and glowing description of all the honors and advantages to be derived from his appointment at that seat of learning, Dotheboys Hall.

"But what's the matter,—are you ill?" said Nicholas, suddenly breaking off, as his companion, after throwing himself into a variety of uncouth attitudes, thrust his hands under the stool, and cracked his finger joints as if he were snapping all the bones in his hands.

Newman Noggs made no reply, but went on shrugging his shoulders and cracking his finger joints; smiling horribly all the time, and looking steadfastly at nothing out of the tops of his eyes, in a most ghastly manner.

At first Nicholas thought the mysterious man was in a fit, but, on further consideration, decided that he was in liquor, under which circumstances he deemed it prudent to make off at once. He looked back when he got the street door open. Newman Noggs was still indulging in the same extraordinary gestures, and the cracking of his fingers sounded louder than ever.

If tears dropped into a trunk were charms to preserve its owner from sorrow and misfortune, Nicholas Nickleby would have commenced his expedition under most happy auspices.

The box was packed at last, and then there came supper, with some little delicacy provided for the occasion, and as a set-off against

the expense of which, Kate and her mother had feigned to dine when Nicholas was out. The poor lad nearly choked himself by attempting to partake of it, and almost suffocated himself in affecting a jest or two, and forcing a melancholy laugh. Thus they lingered on till the hour of separating for the night was long past; and then they found that they might as well have given vent to their real feelings before, for they could not suppress them, do what they would. So they let them have their way, and even that was a relief.

Nicholas slept till six next morning; and rose quite brisk and gay. He wrote a few lines in pencil to say good-bye, which he was afraid to pronounce himself, and laying them, with half his scanty stock of money, at his sister's door, shouldered his box and crept softly down stairs.

"Is that you, Hannah?" cried a voice from Miss La Creevy's sitting-room.

"It is I, Miss La Creevy," said Nicholas, putting down the box and looking in.

"Bless us!" exclaimed Miss La Creevy, starting and putting her hand to her curl-papers. "You're up early, Mr. Nickleby. You don't mean to say that you are really going all the way down to Yorkshire this cold winter weather? I heard something of it last night."

"I do, indeed," replied Nicholas. "Needs must, you know, when somebody drives. Necessity is my driver, and that is only another name for the same gentleman."

"Well, I am very sorry for it; that's all I can say," said Miss La Creevy; "as much on your mother's and sister's account as on yours. Your sister is a pretty young lady, Mr. Nickleby. I persuaded her to give me a sitting or two for the street-door case. Ah! she'll make a sweet miniature."

"If you ever have an opportunity of showing Kate some little kindness," said Nicholas, presenting his hand, "I think you will."

"Depend upon that," said the good-natured miniature painter; "and God bless you, Mr. Nickleby; and I wish you well."

By the time Nicholas had found a man to carry his box it was only seven o'clock, so he walked slowly on, a little in advance of the porter and very probably with not half as light a heart in his breast as the man had, although he had no waistcoat to cover it with, and had evidently, from the appearance of his other garments, been spend-the night in a stable, and taking his breakfast at a pump.

Nicholas speedily arrived at the *Saracen's Head*, Snow Hill. Then, having dismissed his attendant, and seen the box safely deposited in the coach office, he looked into the coffee-room in search of Mr. Squeers, and was in the full heat and bustle of departure when his uncle, Mr. Ralph Nickleby accosted him.

"Oh! sir, here you are!" said Ralph. "Here are your mother and sister, sir."

"Where?" cried Nicholas, looking round hastily.

"Here!" replied his uncle. "Having too much money and nothing at all to do with it, they were paying a hackney coach as I came up, sir."

"We were afraid of being too late to see him before he went away from us," said Mrs. Nickleby, embracing her son.

"Now, Nickleby," said Squeers coming up buttoning his great-coat; "I think you'd better get up behind. I'm afraid of one of them boys falling off, and then there's twenty pound a year gone."

"Dear Nicholas," whispered Kate, touching her brother's arm, "who is that vulgar man?"

"My employer, or master, or whatever the proper name may be," replied Nicholas. "It is time I was in my place. Bless you, love, and good-bye! Mother, look forward to our meeting again some day! Uncle, farewell! Thank you heartily for all you have done and all you mean to do for us. Quite ready, sir."

With these hasty adieux, Nicholas mounted nimbly to his seat, and waved his hand as gallantly as if his heart went with it.

At this moment, when the coachman and guard were comparing notes for the last time before starting on the subject of the way-bill; when porters were screwing out the last reluctant sixpences,

itinerant newsmen making the last offer of a morning paper, and the horses giving the last impatient rattle to their harness, Nicholas felt somebody pulling softly at his leg. He looked down, and there stood Newman Noggs, who pushed a dirty letter into his hand.

"What's this?" inquired Nicholas.

"Hush!" rejoined Noggs, pointing to Mr. Ralph Nickleby, who was saying a few earnest words to Squeers, a short distance off. "Take it; read it; nobody knows. That's all."

"Stop!" cried Nicholas.

"No," replied Noggs

Nicholas cried stop again, but Newman Noggs was gone.

A minute's bustle, a banging of the coach doors, a swaying of the vehicle to one side, as the heavy coachman and still heavier guard climbed into their seats; a cry of all right, a few notes from the horn, a hasty glance of two sorrowful faces below and the hard features of Mr. Ralph Nickleby—and the coach was gone too, and rattling over the stones of Smithfield.

CHAPTER THREE

DOTHEBOYS HALL



RIDE of two hundred and odd miles in severe weather is one of the best softeners of a hard bed that ingenuity can devise. Perhaps it is even a sweetener of dreams, for those which hovered over the rough couch of Nicholas and whispered their airy nothings in his ear, were of an agreeable and happy kind. He was making his fortune very fast indeed, when the faint glimmer of an expiring candle shone before his eyes, and a voice he had no difficulty in recognizing as part and parcel of Mr. Squeers, admonished him that it was time to rise,

"Past seven, Nickleby," said Mr. Squeers.

"Has morning come already?" asked Nicholas, sitting up in bed.

"Ah! that it has," replied Squeers, "and ready iced, too. Now, Nickleby, come; tumble up, will you?"

Nicholas needed no further admonition, but "tumbled up" at once and proceeded to dress himself by the light of the taper which Squeers carried in his hand.

"Here's a pretty go," said that gentleman; "the pump's froze."

"Indeed!" said Nicholas, not much interested in the intelligence.

"Yes," replied Squeers. "You can't wash yourself this morning."

"Not wash myself!" exclaimed Nicholas.

"Not a bit of it," rejoined Squeers, tartly. "So you must be content with giving yourself a dry polish till we break the ice in the well, and can get a bucketful for the boys. Don't stand staring at me, but do look sharp, will you?"

Nicholas huddled on his clothes. Squeers, meanwhile, opened the shutters and blew the candle out; when the voice of his amiable consort was heard in the passage demanding admittance.

"Come in, my love," said Squeers.

Mrs. Squeers came in, still habited in her night-jacket, and further ornamented with a beaver bonnet of some antiquity.

"Drat the things," said the lady, opening the cupboard; "I can't find the school spoon anywhere."

"Never mind, my dear," observed Squeers, "it's of no consequence."

"No consequence, why how you talk!" retorted Mrs. Squeers sharply; "isn't it brimstone morning?"

"I forgot, my dear," rejoined Squeers; "yes, it certainly is. We purify the boys' bloods now and then, Nickleby."

"Oh! nonsense," said Mrs. Squeers. "If the young man comes to be a teacher here, let him understand, at once, that we don't want any foolery about the boys. They have the brimstone and treacle, partly because if they hadn't something or other in the way of medicine, they'd be always ailing and giving a world of trouble,

and partly because it spoils their appetites and comes cheaper than breakfast and dinner. So, it does them good and us good at the same time, and that's fair enough, I'm sure."

"A most invaluable woman, that, Nickleby," said Squeers when his consort, having found the spoon, had hurried away.

"Indeed, sir," observed Nicholas.

"I don't know her equal," said Squeers; "I do not know her equal. That woman, Nickleby, is always the same—always the same bustling, lively, active, saving creetur that you see her now. But, come, let's go to the school-room, and lend me a hand with my coat, will you?"

Nicholas assisted his master to put on an old fustian shooting-jacket, which he took down from a peg in the passage; and Squeers, arming himself with his cane, led the way across a yard, to a door in the rear of the house.

"There," said the schoolmaster as they stepped in together; "this is our shop, Nickleby."

It was such a crowded scene, and there were so many objects to attract attention, that, at first, Nicholas stared about him, really without seeing anything at all. By degrees, however, the place resolved itself into a bare and dirty room, with a couple of windows, whereof a tenth part might be of glass, the remainder being stopped up with old copybooks and paper. There were a couple of long, old, rickety desks, cut and notched, and inked, and damaged, in every possible way; two or three forms; a detached desk for Squeers; and another for his assistant. The ceiling was supported, like that of a barn, by cross beams and rafters; and the walls were so stained and discolored that it was impossible to tell whether they had ever been touched with paint or whitewash.

But the pupils! How all hope of any good to be derived from his efforts in this den, faded from the mind of Nicholas, as he looked around! Pale and haggard faces, lank and bony figures, children with the countenances of old men, deformities with irons upon their limbs, boys of stunted growth, and others whose long, meagre legs

would hardly bear their stooping bodies, all crowded on the view together.

And yet this scene, painful as it was, had its grotesque features, which, in a less interested observer than Nicholas, might have provoked a smile. Mrs. Squeers stood at one of the desks, presiding over an immense basin of brimstone and treacle, of which delicious compound she administered a large instalment to each boy in succession.

"Now," said Squeers, giving the desk a great rap with his cane, which made half the little boys nearly jump out of their boots, "is that physicing over?"

"Just over," said Mrs. Squeers, choking the last boy in her hurry, and tapping the crown of his head with the spoon to restore him. "Here you, Smike, take away now. Look sharp!"

Smike, a tall, lean boy, who could not have been less than eighteen or nineteen years old, shuffled out with the basin, and Mrs. Squeers, having called up a little boy with a curly head and wiped her hands upon it, hurried out after him into a species of wash house, where there was a small fire and a large kettle, together with a number of little wooden bowls which were arranged upon a board.

Into these bowls, Mrs. Squeers, assisted by the hungry servant, poured a brown composition, which looked like diluted pincushions without the covers and was called porridge. A minute wedge of brown bread was inserted in each bowl, and when they had eaten their porridge by means of the bread, the boys ate the bread itself, and had finished their breakfast; whereupon Mr. Squeers said, in a solemn voice: "For what we have received, may the Lord make us thankful!"—and went away to his own.

After some half-hour's delay, Mr. Squeers reappeared, and the boys took their places. Mr. Squeers called up the first class.

Obedient to this summons there ranged themselves in front of the schoolmaster's desk, half a dozen scarecrows, out at knees and elbows, one of whom placed a torn and filthy book beneath his learned eye.



Mrs. Squeers dispenses brimstone and treacle.—Page 24

"This is the first class in English spelling and philosophy, Nickleby," said Squeers, beckoning Nicholas to stand beside him. "We will get up a Latin one, and hand that over to you. Now, then, where's the first boy?"

"Please, sir, he's cleaning the back parlor window," said the temporary head of the philosophical class.

"So he is, to be sure," rejoined Squeers. "We go upon the practical method of teaching, Nickleby; the regular education system. C-l-e-a-n, clean, verb active, to make bright, to scour. W-i-n, win, d-e-r, der, winder, a casement. When the boy knows this out of book, he goes and does it. It's just the same principle as the use of the globes. Where's the second boy?"

"Please, sir, he's weedin' the garden," said a small voice.

"To be sure," said Squeers, by no means disconcerted. "So he is. B-o-t, bot, t-i-n, tin, bottin, n-e-y, ney, bottinney, noun substantive, a knowledge of plants. When he has learned that bottinney means a knowledge of plants, he goes and knows 'em. That's our system, Nickleby; what do you think of it?"

"It's a very useful one, anyway," said Nicholas.

"I believe you," rejoined Squeers, not remarking the emphasis of his assistant.

"That's the way we do it, Nickleby," he said after a while.

Nicholas said he saw it was.

"And a very good way it is, too," said Squeers. "Now, just take them fourteen little boys and hear them some reading, because, you know, you must begin to be useful. Idling about here, won't do."

In this exciting occupation, the morning lagged heavily on. At one o'clock the boys, having previously had their appetites thoroughly taken away by stir-about and potatoes, sat down in the kitchen to some hard salt beef, of which Nicholas was graciously permitted to take his portion to his own solitary desk, to eat there in peace. After this, there was another hour of crouching in the schoolroom and shivering with the cold, and then school began for the afternoon.

It was Mr. Squeers' custom to call the boys together and make a sort of report, after every half-yearly visit to the metropolis. This solemn proceeding always took place in the afternoon of the day succeeding his return, so he now proceeded to open a miscellaneous collection of letters; some enclosing money, which Mrs. Squeers "took care of"; and others referring to small articles of apparel, as caps and so forth, all of which the same lady stated to be too large or too small, and calculated for nobody but young Wackford Squeers, who would appear indeed to have had most accommodating limbs, since everything that came into the school fitted him to a nicety.

This business dispatched, a few slovenly lessons were performed, and Squeers retired to his fireside, in a small apartment in the rear of the premises, where his lady wife, his amiable son, and accomplished daughter, were in the full enjoyment of one another's society; Mrs. Squeers being engaged in the matronly pursuit of stocking-darning; and the young lady and gentleman being occupied in the adjustment of some youthful differences, by means of a pugilistic contest across the table, which, on the approach of their honored father, subsided into a noiseless exchange of kicks beneath the table. Nicholas was left to take care of the boys in the schoolroom, which was very cold, and where a meal of bread and cheese was served out shortly after dark. There was a small stove at that corner of the room which was nearest to the master's desk, and by it Nicholas sat down, so depressed and self-degraded by the consciousness of his position, that if death could have come upon him at that time he would have been almost been happy to meet it.

As he was absorbed in meditation, he all at once encountered the upturned face of Smike, who was on his knees before the stove, picking a few stray cinders from the hearth and planting them on the fire. He had paused to steal a look at Nicholas, when he saw that he was observed, and shrank back as if expecting a blow.

"You need not fear me," said Nicholas, kindly, "are you cold?"

"N-no."

"You are shivering."

"I am not cold," said Smike quickly. "I am used to it."

There was such obvious fear of giving offense in his manner, and he was such a timid, broken-spirited creature, that Nicholas could not help exclaiming, "Poor fellow!"

If he had struck the drudge he would have slunk away without a word. But now he burst into tears.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" he cried, covering his face with his cracked and horny hands. "My heart will break! It will, it will."

"Hush!" said Nicholas, laying his hand upon his shoulder. "Be a man; you are nearly one by years, God help you."

"By years!" cried Smike. "Oh dear, dear, how many of them! How many of them since I was a little child, younger than any that are here now! Where are they all!"

"Whom do you speak of?" inquired Nicholas, wishing to rouse the poor, half-witted creature to reason. "Tell me."

"My friends," he replied, "myself—my—oh! what sufferings mine have been!"

"There is always hope," said Nicholas; he knew not what to say.

"No," rejoined the other, "no; none for me."

The bell rang to bed, and the boy, subsiding at the sound, into his usual listless state, crept away as if anxious to avoid notice.

Smike, as Nicholas learned from remarks made by Squeers, had been left when quite a small child at Dotheboys Hall. For six years money had been paid for him; but after that no notice had been taken and no clue could be got to whom the boy belonged. Squeers had kept him on, not out of charity, of course, but because he was a handy servant and cost nothing but such meat and drink as he received.



CHAPTER FOUR

NICHOLAS VARIES THE MONOTONY OF DOTHEBOYS HALL

 NICHOLAS resolved that, come what might, he would try for a time to bear whatever wretchedness might be in store for him, in order that his uncle might have no plea for deserting his mother and sister in their need. He hoped that by remaining where he was, he might do some good even there.

But it was impossible that a young man of spirit, like Nicholas, and one with a kindly heart too, should be liked by such people as the Squeers family. They quickly saw the loathing he felt for their meanness and began to hate him bitterly. He was treated with every indignity that the malice of petty minds could suggest.

Nor was this all. There was another and deeper system of annoyance which made his heart sink, and nearly drove him wild by its injustice and cruelty. The wretched creature, Smike, since the night Nicholas had spoken kindly to him in the schoolroom, had followed him to and fro, with an ever restless desire to serve or help him. Upon this poor being, all the spleen and ill-humor that could not be vented on Nicholas were unceasingly bestowed. It was no sooner observed that he had become attached to Nicholas, than stripes and blows, stripes and blows, morning, noon, and night, were his only portion. Squeers was jealous of the influence which his assistant had so soon acquired, and his family hated him, and Smike paid for both. Nicholas saw it, and ground his teeth at every repetition of the savage and cowardly attack.

He had arranged a few regular lessons for the boys; and one night as he paced up and down the dismal schoolroom, his heart almost bursting to think that his protection should have increased the mis-

ery of the wretched being whose destitution had awakened his pity, he paused in a dark corner where sat the object of his thoughts. Smike was weeping.

"Do not cry," said Nicholas, in an agitated voice, "I can not bear to see you."

"They are more hard with me than ever," sobbed the boy.

"I know it," replied Nicholas, "they are."

"But for you," said the outcast, "I should die. They would kill me; they would; I know they would."

"You will do better, poor fellow," replied Nicholas, shaking his head mournfully, "when I am gone."

"Gone!" cried Smike, looking intently in his face.

"Softly!" rejoined Nicholas. "Yes."

"Are you going?" demanded the boy in an earnest whisper.

"I can not say," replied Nicholas. "I was speaking more to my own thoughts than to you."

"Tell me," said the boy, imploringly, "Oh do tell me, *will* you go—*will* you?"

"I shall be driven to that at last!" said Nicholas. "The world is before me, after all."

"Tell me," urged Smike, "is the world as bad and dismal as this place?"

"Heaven forbid," replied Nicholas, pursuing the train of his own thoughts, "its hardest, coarsest toil were happiness to this."

"Should I ever meet you there?" demanded the boy, speaking with unusual wildness.

"Yes," replied Nicholas, willing to soothe him.

"No, no!" cried the other, clasping him by the hand. "Should I—should I—tell me that again. Say I should be sure to find you."

"You would," replied Nicholas, with the same humane intention, "and I would help and aid you, and not bring fresh sorrow on you as I have done here."

The boy caught both the young man's hands passionately in his, and, hugging them to his breast, uttered a few broken sounds which

were unintelligible. Squeers entered, at the moment, and he shrank back into his old corner.

The next morning Smike was not to be found. Squeers inquired of the boys whether any one among them knew anything of their missing schoolmate.

There was a general hum of anxious denial, in the midst of which, one shrill voice was heard to say (as, indeed, everybody thought):

“Please, sir, I think Smike’s run away, sir.”

“Ha!” cried Squeers, turning sharp around; “who said that?”

“Tompkins, please, sir,” rejoined a chorus of voices. Mr. Squeers made a plunge into the crowd, and at one dive, caught a very little boy, habited still in his night gear, and the perplexed expression of whose countenance as he was brought forward, seemed to intimate that he was not yet certain whether he was about to be punished or rewarded for the suggestion. He was not long in doubt.

“You think he has run away, do you, sir?” demanded Squeers.

“Yes, sir, please,” replied the little boy.

“And what, sir,” said Squeers, catching the little boy suddenly by the arms and whisking up his drapery in a most dexterous manner, “what reason have you to suppose that any boy would want to run away from this establishment? Eh, sir?”

The child raised a dismal cry by way of answer, and Mr. Squeers, throwing himself into the most favorable attitude for exercising his strength, beat him until the little urchin in his writhings actually rolled out of his hands, when he mercifully allowed him to roll away, as best he could.

“If I catch him,” said Squeers, “I’ll only stop short of flaying him alive. I give you notice, boys.”

“If you catch him,” retorted Mrs. Squeers, contemptuously, “you are sure to; you can’t help it if you go the right way to work. He must beg his way, and he could do that nowhere but on the public road.”

“That’s true,” exclaimed Squeers, clapping his hands.

“True! Yes, but you would never have thought of it, for all that,

if I hadn't said so," replied his wife. "Now, if you take the chaise and go one road, and I borrow Swallow's chaise and go the other, one or other of us is pretty certain to lay hold of him."

The worthy lady's plan was adopted and put in execution without a moment's delay. After a very hasty breakfast, Squeers started out in the pony chaise, intent upon discovery and vengeance. Shortly afterwards, Mrs. Squeers issued forth in another chaise and another direction.

Nicholas remained behind in a tumult of feeling, sensible that whatever might be the upshot of the boy's flight, nothing but painful and deplorable consequences were likely to ensue from it. He lingered on, in a restless anxiety, until the evening of the next day, when Squeers returned alone and unsuccessful.

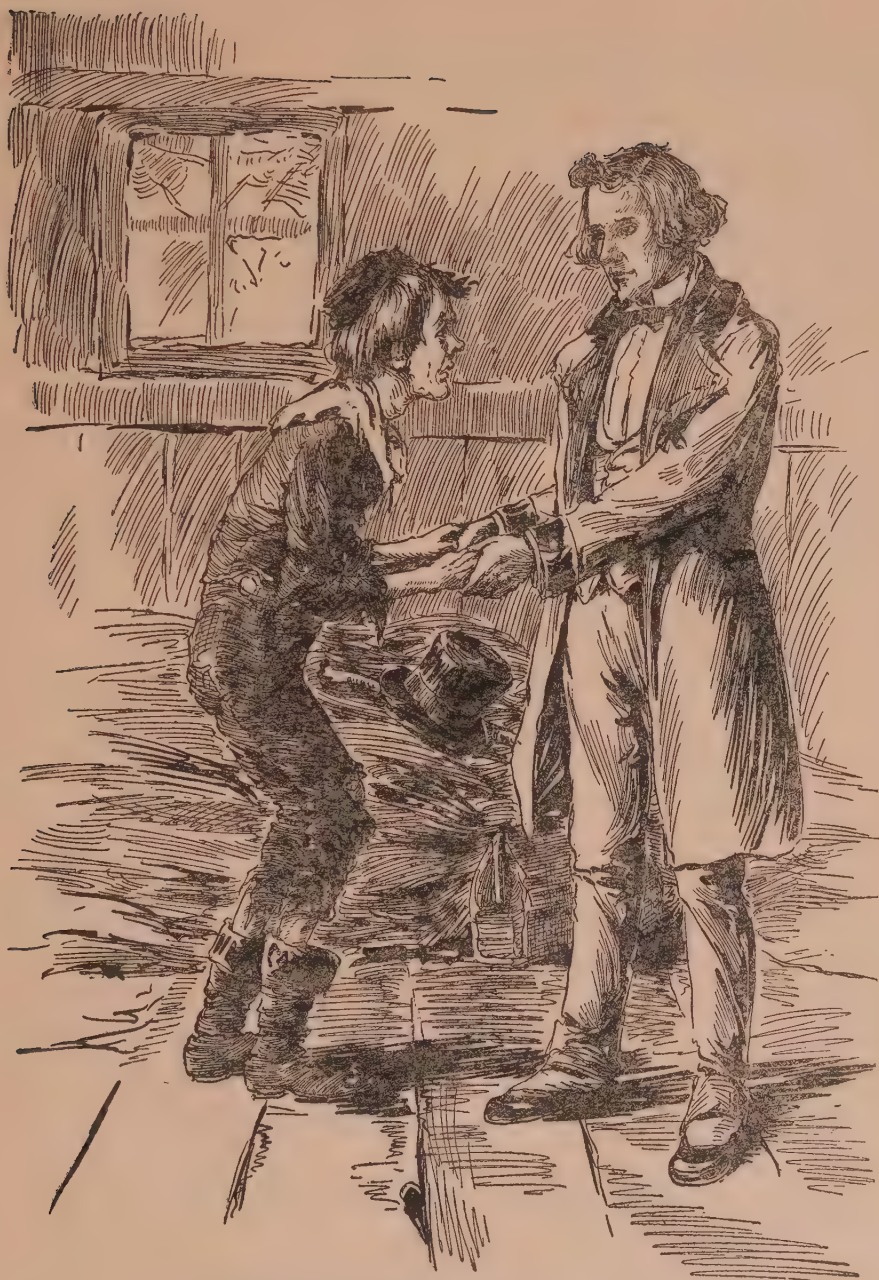
Another day came, and Nicholas was scarcely awake when he heard the wheels of a chaise approaching the house. It stopped. The voice of Mrs. Squeers was heard, and in exultation. Nicholas hardly dared to look out of the window; but he did so, and the very first object that met his eyes was the wretched Smike, so bedabbled with mud and rain, so haggard and worn and wild, that, but for his garments being such as no scarecrow was ever seen to wear, he might have been doubtful, even then, of his identity.

The news that Smike had been caught and brought back in triumph, ran like wild-fire through the hungry community and expectation was on tiptoe until afternoon, when Squeers made his appearance (accompanied by his amiable partner) with a fearful instrument of flagellation, strong, supple, wax-ended, and new—in short, purchased that morning, expressly for the occasion.

"Each boy keep his place," said Squeers. "Nickleby, to your desk, sir."

It was remarked by more than one small observer, that there was a very curious expression in the assistant teacher's face; but he took his seat, without opening his lips in reply. Squeers left the room, and shortly afterward returned, dragging Smike by the collar.

"Have you anything to say?" demanded Squeers, giving his arm



Smike begs to go with Nicholas.—Page 35

two or three little flourishes to try its power and suppleness. "Stand a little out of the way, Mrs. Squeers, my dear; I've hardly got room enough."

"Spare me, sir" cried Smike.

"Oh! that's all, is it?" said Squeers. "Yes, I'll flog you within an inch of your life, and spare you that."

"I was driven to do it," said Smike faintly.

"Driven to do it, were you?" said Squeers. "Oh! it wasn't your fault; it was mine, I suppose, eh?"

Squeers caught the boy firmly in his grip; one desperate cut had fallen on his body—he was wincing from the lash and uttering a scream of pain—it was raised again, and again about to fall—when Nicholas Nickleby suddenly started up, crying "Stop!" in a voice that made the rafters ring.

"Who cried stop?" cried Squeers, almost in a shriek.

"I," said Nicholas, stepping forward, "this must not go on."

"Must not go on!" cried Squeers, turning savagely round.

"No," thundered Nicholas. "I will not stand by and see it done. My blood is up, and I have the strength of ten such men as you. Look to yourself, for by Heaven, I will not spare you, if you drive me on!"

He had scarcely spoken, when Squeers, in a violent outbreak of wrath, and with a cry like the howl of a wild beast, struck him a blow across the face with his instrument of torture, which raised up a bar of livid flesh as it was inflicted. Smarting with the agony of the blow, and concentrating into that one moment all his feelings of rage, scorn, and indignation, Nicholas sprang upon him, wrested the weapon from his hand, and pinning him by the throat, beat the ruffian till he roared for mercy.

When his arm began to grow weak, Nicholas threw all his remaining strength into half a dozen finishing cuts, and flung Squeers from him, with all the force he could muster. Squeers struck his head against an adjacent bench in his descent, and lay at his full length on the ground, stunned and motionless.

Having brought affairs to this happy termination, and ascertained to his thorough satisfaction, that Squeers was only stunned, and not dead, Nicholas left his family to restore him, and retired to consider what course he had better adopt. He looked anxiously around for Smike, as he left the room, but he was nowhere to be seen.

After a brief consideration, he packed up a few clothes in a small valise, marched boldly out by the front door, and shortly afterwards struck into the road which led to Greta Bridge.

He resolved to go to London, but as he had only four shillings and a few pence in his pocket, and was something more than two hundred and fifty miles from that city, he would have found it a hard task to reach his destination if he had not happened to meet a good-natured Yorkshireman, named John Browdie, whose acquaintance he had made. When Nicholas told him what had happened, he insisted on lending him money enough to meet his present necessities.

Nicholas did not travel far that afternoon, for by this time it was nearly dark. He lay that night at a cottage, where beds were let at a cheap rate to the more humble class of travellers; and rising betimes next morning, made his way before night to Boroughbridge. Passing through that town, he stumbled upon an empty barn, in a warm corner of which he stretched his weary limbs, and soon fell asleep. When he awoke next morning, he rubbed his eyes, and stared at a motionless object which seemed to be stationed within a few yards in front of him.

"Strange!" cried Nicholas; "this can not be real—and yet I—am awake! Smike!"

The form moved, rose, advanced, and dropped upon its knees at his feet. It was Smike indeed.

"Why do you kneel to me?" said Nicholas, hastily raising him.

"To go with you—anywhere—everywhere—to the world's end—to the churchyard grave," replied Smike, clinging to his hand. "Let me, oh, do let me. You are my home—my kind friend take me with you, pray!"

"I am a friend who can do little for you," said Nicholas, kindly. "How came you here?"

He had followed him, it seemed; had never lost sight of him all the way; had watched while he slept, and when he halted for refreshment; and had feared to appear before lest he should be sent back. He had not intended to appear now, but Nicholas had awakened more suddenly than he looked for, and he had had no time to conceal himself.

"Poor fellow!" said Nicholas, "your hard fate denies you any friend but one, and he is nearly as poor and helpless as yourself."

"May I—may I go with you?" asked Smike, timidly. "I will be your faithful hardworking servant, I will, indeed. I want no clothes, these will do very well," added the poor creature drawing his rags together. "I only want to be near you."

"And you shall," cried Nicholas. "And the world shall deal by you as it does by me, till one or both of us quit it for a better. Come!"

With these words, he strapped his burden on his shoulders, and, taking his stick in one hand, extended the other to his delighted charge; and so they passed out of the old barn together.

CHAPTER FIVE

NICHOLAS ENCOUNTERS HIS UNCLE

ISS LA CREEVY, early one Monday morning, had scarcely caught the full flavor of her first sip of tea, when the servant announced a gentleman; whereat Miss La Creevy, at once imagining a new sitter transfixed by admiration at the case at the street door, was in unspeakable consternation at the presence of the tea things.

"Here, take 'em away. Run with 'em into the bedroom; anywhere," said Miss La Creevy. "Dear, dear! to think that I should

be late on this particular morning of all others, after being ready for three weeks by half-past eight o'clock, and not a soul coming near the place!"

"Don't let me put you out of the way," said a voice Miss La Creevy knew. "I told the servant not to mention my name, because I wished to surprise you."

"Mr. Nicholas!" cried Miss La Creevy, starting in great astonishment.

"You have not forgotten me, I see," replied Nicholas.

"Why I think I should even have known you if I had met you on the street," said Miss La Creevy, with a smile. "But now I look at you again, you seem thinner than when last I saw you, and your face is haggard and pale. And how come you to have left Yorkshire?"

She stopped here; for there was so much heart in her altered tone and manner, that Nicholas was quite moved.

"I need look somewhat changed," he said, after a short silence; "for I have undergone some suffering, both of mind and body, since I left London. I have been poor, too, and have even suffered from want."

"Good Heaven, Mr. Nicholas!" exclaimed Miss La Creevy, "what are you telling me!"

"Nothing which need distress you quite so much," answered Nicholas, with a more sprightly air; "neither did I come here to bewail my lot, but on matters more to the purpose. I wish to meet my uncle face to face. I should tell you that first."

"Then all I have to say about that is," interposed Miss La Creevy, "that I don't envy you your taste; and that sitting in the same room with his very boots, would put me out of humor for a fortnight."

"In the main," said Nicholas, "there may be no great difference of opinion between you and me, so far; but you will understand that I desire to confront him, to justify myself."

"That's quite another matter," rejoined Miss La Creevy. "Heaven forgive me, but I shouldn't cry my eyes quite out of my head if they choked him? Well."

"To this end I called upon him this morning," said Nicholas.

"And did you see him?" asked Miss La Creevy.

"No," replied Nicholas. "He had gone out.

"I have reason to believe," pursued Nicholas, "from what has been told me by a friend of mine who is acquainted with his movements, that he intends seeing my mother and sister to-day, and giving them his version of the occurrences that have befallen me. I will meet him here."

"That's right," said Miss La Creevy, rubbing her hands. "And yet, I don't know," she added, "there is much to be thought of—others to be considered."

"I have considered others," rejoined Nicholas; "but, as honesty and honor are both at issue, nothing shall deter me."

"You should know best," said Miss La Creevy.

"In this case, I hope so," answered Nicholas. "And all I want you to do for me is to prepare them for my coming. They think me a long way off, and if I went wholly unexpected, I should frighten them."

It so chanced that Mr. Ralph Nickleby, seeing fit, for his own purposes, to communicate the atrocities of which Nicholas had been guilty, had gone straight to his sister-in-law. Hence, when Miss La Creevy made her way into the sitting-room, she found Mrs. Nickleby and Kate in tears, and Ralph just concluding his statement of his nephew's misdemeanors. Kate beckoned her not to retire, and Miss La Creevy took a seat in silence.

"You are already here, are you, my gentleman?" thought the little woman. "Then he shall announce himself, and see what effect that has on you."

"This is very pretty," said Ralph, folding up a note from Yorkshire; "very pretty. I recommend him—against all my previous conviction, for I knew he would never do any good.—to a man with whom, behaving himself properly, he might have remained, in comfort, for years. What is the result? Conduct, for which he might hold up his hand at the Old Bailey."



Ralph and Nicholas express their opinion of each other.—Page 41

"I will never believe it," said Kate, indignantly: "never. It is some base conspiracy, which carries its own falsehood with it."

"My dear," said Ralph, "you wrong the worthy man. These are not inventions. The man is assaulted, your brother is not to be found; this boy of whom you speak, goes with him. Do innocent men steal away from the sight of honest folks, and skulk in hiding-places, like out-laws? Do innocent men inveigle nameless vagabonds, and prowl with them about the country as idle robbers do? Assault, riot, theft, what do you call these?"

"A lie!" cried a voice as the door was dashed open, and Nicholas came into the room.

In the first moment of surprise, and possibly of alarm, Ralph rose from his seat, and fell back a few paces, quite taken off his guard by this unexpected apparition. In another moment, he stood, fixed and immovable with folded arms, regarding his nephew with a scowl.

"Dear Nicholas," cried his sister, clinging to him. "Be calm, consider——"

"Consider, Kate!" cried Nicholas, clasping her hand. "When I consider all, and think of what has passed, I need to be made of iron to stand before him."

"Refute these calumnies," said Kate, "and be more patient, so that you may give them no advantage. Tell us what you really did, and show that they are untrue."

"Of what do they—or of what does he—accuse me?" said Nicholas.

"First of attacking your master, and being within an ace of qualifying yourself to be tried for murder," interposed Ralph. "I speak plainly, young man, bluster as you will."

"I interfered," said Nicholas, "to save a miserable creature from the vilest cruelty. In so doing, I inflicted such punishment upon a wretch as he will not readily forget, though far less than he deserved from me. If the same scene were renewed before me now, I would take the same part; but I would strike harder and heavier, and brand him with such marks as he should carry to his grave, go to it when he would."

"You hear," said Ralph, appealing to the mother, "everything proved, even upon his own confession. Do you choose to restore that boy, sir?"

"No, I do not," replied Nicholas.

"You do not?" sneered Ralph.

"No," repeated Nicholas, "not to the man with whom I found him. I would that I knew on whom he has the claim of birth. I might wring something from his sense of shame, if he were dead to every tie of nature."

"Indeed!" said Ralph. "Now, sir, will you hear a word or two from me?"

"You can speak when and what you please," replied Nicholas. "I take little heed of what you say or threaten."

"Mighty well, sir," retorted Ralph; "but perhaps it may concern others, who may think it worth their while to listen, and consider what I tell them. I will address your mother, sir, who knows the world. I hold out no threat now, but I say that this boy, headstrong, wilful, and disorderly as he is, should not have one penny of my money, or one crust of my bread, or one grasp of my hand, to save him from the loftiest gallows in all Europe. I regret to leave you, but I will not encourage this compound of meanness and cruelty, and, as I will not ask you to renounce him, I see you no more."

"I can't help it," cried Mrs. Nickleby. "I know you have been very good to us, and meant to do a good deal for my daughter. I am quite sure of that; I know you did, and it was very kind of you. But I can't, you know, brother-in-law, I can't renounce my own son, even if he has done all you say he has—it's not possible; I could not do it; so we must go to rack and ruin, Kate, my dear. I can bear it, I dare say." Mrs. Nickleby wrung her hands, and her tears fell faster.

"Why do you say *if* Nicholas has done what you say he has, mamma?" asked Kate, with honest anger. "You know he hasn't."

"Stay," said Nicholas, as Ralph turned to go. "Whatever step you take, sir," he said, in a voice inaudible beyond themselves, "I shall keep a strict account of. There will be a day of reckoning

sooner or later, and it will be a heavy one for you if they are wronged."

Ralph, as he went out, did not allow a muscle of his face to indicate he heard one word of this parting address.

CHAPTER SIX

NICHOLAS MEETS NEW ACQUAINTANCES

HAVING left his mother and sister in the apartments of the kind-hearted miniature painter, Nicholas turned his thoughts to poor Smike. "As he will be one of our own little household, wherever we live, or whatever fortune may be in reserve for us, I must present the poor fellow in due form. They will be kind to him for his own sake, and if not (on that account solely) to the full extent I could wish, they will stretch a point, I am sure, for mine."

Nicholas said "they," but his misgivings were confined to one person. He was sure of Kate, but he knew his mother's peculiarities, and was not quite so certain that Smike would find favor in her eyes.

"However," thought Nicholas as he departed on his benevolent errand; "she cannot fail to become attached to him, when she knows what a devoted creature he is, and as she must quickly make the discovery, his probation will be a short one."

It was toward the lodgings of Newman Noggs that Nicholas now directed his steps, for it was with him that he and Smike had found refuge on arriving in London. The letter that had been handed to Nicholas as he left for Yorkshire had been the cause of his seeking this retreat. It ran as follows:

"My dear young Man:

"I know the world. Your father did not, or he would not have done me a kindness when there was no hope of return. You do not, or you would not be bound on such a journey.

"If ever you want a shelter in London (don't be angry at this, I once thought I never should), they know where I live, at the sign of the Crown, in Silver Street, Golden Square. It is at the corner of Silver Street and James Street, with a bar door both ways. You can come at night. Once nobody was ashamed—never mind that. It's all over.

"Excuse errors. I have forgotten how to wear a whole coat. I have forgotten all my old ways. My spelling may have gone with them.

"Newman Noggs."

Nicholas Nickleby's eyes, when he read this, had been dimmed with a moisture that might have been taken for tears. The odd but worthy old clerk had since proved himself, indeed, a friend in the hour of need.

"I was afraid," said Smike, overjoyed to see Nicholas again, "that you had fallen into some fresh trouble; the time seemed so long, at last, that I almost feared you were lost."

"Lost!" replied Nicholas gaily. "You will not be rid of me so easily, I promise you. But come; my errand here is to take you home."

"Home!" faltered Smike, drawing timidly back.

"Ay," rejoined Nicholas, taking his arm, "Why not?"

"I had such hopes once," said Smike; "day and night, day and night, for many years. I longed for home till I was weary and pined away with grief; but now——"

"And what now?" asked Nicholas, looking kindly in his face.

"I could not part from you to go to any home on earth," replied Smike, pressing his hand; "except one, except one. I shall never be an old man; and if your hand placed me in the grave, and I could think, before I died, that you would come and look upon it sometimes with one of your kind smiles, and in the summer weather, when everything was alive—not dead like me—I could go to that home almost without a tear."

"Why do you talk thus, poor boy, if your life is a happy one with me?" said Nicholas.

"Because *I* should change; not those about me. And if they forgot me, *I* should never know it," replied Smike. "In the churchyard we are all alike, but here there are none like me. I am a poor creature, but I know that."

"You are a foolish, silly creature," said Nicholas cheerfully. "If that is what you mean, I grant you that. Why, here's a dismal face for ladies' company!—my pretty sister, too, whom you have so often asked me about. Is this your Yorkshire gallantry? For shame! for shame!"

Smike brightened up and smiled.

"When I talk of home, replied Nicholas, "I talk of mine—which is yours, of course. I speak of the place where, in default of a better, those I love are gathered together. And now, for what is my present home: which however alarming your expectations may be, will neither terrify you by its extent nor its magnificence!" So saying, Nicholas took his companion by the arm, and led the way to Miss La Creevy's house.

"And this, Kate," said Nicholas, entering the room where his sister sat alone, "is the faithful friend and affectionate fellow traveller whom I prepared you to receive."

Poor Smike was bashful and awkward and frightened enough, at first, but Kate advanced towards him so kindly, and said, in such a sweet voice, how anxious she had been to see him after all her brother had told her, and how much she had to thank him for having comforted Nicholas so greatly in their very trying reverses, that he began to be very doubtful whether he should shed tears or not, and became still more flurried. However, he managed to say, in a broken voice, that Nicholas was his only friend, and that he would lay down his life to help him; and Kate, although she was so kind and considerate, seemed to be so wholly unconscious of his distress and embarrassment, that he recovered almost immediately and felt quite at home.

Then Miss La Creevy came in; and to her Smike had to be presented also. And Miss La Creevy was very kind, too, and wonderfully talkative: not to Smike, for that would have made him uneasy

at first, but to Nicholas and his sister. Then, after a time, she spoke to Smike himself, now and then, asking him whether he was a judge of likenesses, and whether he thought the picture in the corner was like herself, and whether he didn't think it would have looked better if she had made herself ten years younger, and whether he didn't think, as a matter of general observation, that young ladies looked better, not only in pictures but out of them, too, than old ones; with many more small jokes and facetious remarks, which were delivered with such good humor and merriment, that Smike thought, within himself, she was the nicest lady he had ever seen.

At length the door opened again, and a lady in mourning came in; and Nicholas kissing the lady in mourning affectionately, and calling her his mother, led her towards the chair from which Smike had risen when she entered the room.

"You are always kind-hearted and anxious to help the oppressed, my dear mother," said Nicholas, "so you will be favorably disposed towards him, I know."

"I am sure, my dear Nicholas," replied Mrs. Nickleby, looking very hard at her new friend, and bending to him with something more of majesty than the occasion seemed to require: "I am sure any friend of yours has, as indeed he naturally ought to have, and must have, of course, you know, a great claim upon me, and, of course, it is a very great pleasure to me to be introduced to anybody you take an interest in. There can be no doubt about that; none at all; not the least in the world. You didn't tell me, Nicholas, my dear," added Mrs. Nickleby, "what your friend's name is."

"His name, mother," replied Nicholas, "is Smike."

"Mr. Smike is from Yorkshire, Nicholas, my dear?" said Mrs. Nickleby.

"Certainly, mother," replied Nicholas. "I see you have not forgotten his melancholy history."

"O dear no!" cried Mrs. Nickleby. "Ah! Melancholy indeed! You don't happen, Mr. Smike, ever to have dined with the Grimble of Grimble Hall, somewhere in the North Riding, do you?" said the

good lady, addressing herself to him. "A very proud man, Sir Thomas Grimble, with six grown-up and most lovely daughters and the finest park in the county."

"Dear mother!" reasoned Nicholas, "do you suppose that the unfortunate outcast of a Yorkshire school was likely to receive many invitations from the nobility and gentry in the neighborhood?"

"Really, my dear, I don't know why it should be so very extraordinary," said Mrs. Nickleby. "I know that when *I* was at school, I always went at least twice every half-year to the Hawkinses at Taunton Vale, and they are much richer than the Grimbles, and connected with them in marriage; so you see it's not so very unlikely, after all."

The little circle remained, on the most amicable and agreeable footing, until the Monday morning, when Nicholas withdrew himself from it for a short time, seriously to reflect upon the state of his affairs, and to determine, if he could, upon some course of life which would enable him to support those who were so entirely dependent upon his exertions.

With no other experience of the world than he had acquired for himself in his short trials; with a sufficient share of headlong rashness and precipitation (qualities not altogether unnatural at his time of life); with a very slender stock of money, and a still more scanty stock of friends, what could he do?

He was making his way along one of the great public thoroughfares of London, when he chanced to raise his eyes to a blue board, whereon was inscribed, in characters of gold, "General Agency Office; for places and situations of all kinds inquire within." It was a shop-front, fitted up with a gauze blind and an inner door; and in the window hung a long and tempting array of written placards, announcing vacant places of every grade, from a secretary's to a footboy's.

As Nicholas stopped to look in at the window, an old gentleman happened to stop to look too; Nicholas, carrying his eye along the window panes from left to right in search of some capital text placard



Nicholas meets Mr. Charles Cheeryble.—Page 49

which should be applicable to his own case, caught sight of this old gentleman's figure, and instinctively withdrew his eyes from the window, to observe the same more closely.

He was a sturdy old fellow in a broad-skirted blue coat, made pretty large, to fit easily, and with no particular waist; his bulky legs clothed in drab breeches and high gaiters, and his head protected by a low-crowned, broad-brimmed white hat, such as a wealthy grazier might wear. But what principally attracted the attention of Nicholas, was the old gentleman's eye—never was such a clear, twinkling, honest, merry, happy eye as that. He looked casually at Nicholas; and the latter, fearful of giving offense, resumed his scrutiny of the window instantly.

Still the old gentleman stood there, glancing from placard to placard, and Nicholas could not forbear raising his eyes to his face again. Grafted upon the quaintness and oddity of his appearance was something so indescribably engaging, that it was not a mere amusement, but a positive pleasure and delight to look at him.

This being the case, it is no wonder that the old man caught Nicholas in the act, more than once. At such times Nicholas colored and looked embarrassed: for the truth is, that he had now begun to wonder whether the stranger could, by any possibility, be looking for a clerk or secretary; and thinking this, he felt as if the old gentleman must know it.

Long as all this takes to tell, it was not more than a couple of minutes in passing. As the stranger was moving away, Nicholas caught his eye again, and, in the awkwardness of the moment, stammered out an apology.

"No offense. No offense." said the old man.

This was said in such a hearty tone, and the voice was so exactly what it should have been from such a speaker, and there was such a cordiality in the manner, that Nicholas was emboldened to speak again.

"A great many opportunities here, sir!" he said, half smiling as he motioned toward the window.

"A great many people willing and anxious to be employed have seriously thought so very often, I dare say," replied the old man. "Poor fellows, poor fellows!"

He moved away as he said this; but seeing that Nicholas was about to speak, good-naturedly slackened his pace, as if he were unwilling to cut him short.

"You were about to speak young gentleman; what were you going to say?"

"Merely that I almost hoped—I mean to say, thought—you had some object in consulting those advertisements," said Nicholas.

"Ay, ay? what object now—what object?" returned the old man, looking slyly at Nicholas. "Did you think I wanted a situation now? Eh? Did you think I did?"

Nicholas shook his head.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the old gentleman, rubbing his hands and his wrists as if he were washing them. "A very natural thought, at all events, after seeing me gazing at those bills. I thought the same of you, at first; upon my word, I did."

"If you had thought so at last, too, sir, you would not have been far from the truth," replied Nicholas.

"Eh?" cried the old man, surveying him from head to foot. "What! Dear me! No, no! Well-behaved young gentleman and reduced to such a necessity! No, no, no, no."

Nicholas bowed, and bidding him good morning, turned upon his heel.

"Stay," said the old man, beckoning him into a bye street, where they could converse with less interruption. "What d'ye mean, eh?"

"Merely that your kind face and manner—both unlike any I have ever seen—tempted me into an avowal, which, to any other stranger in this wilderness of London, I should not have dreamt of making."

"Wilderness! Yes it is, it is. Good! It is a wilderness," said the old man with much animation. "It was a wilderness to me once. I came here barefoot. I have never forgotten it. Thank God!" and he raised his hat from his head, and looked very grave.

"What's the matter? What is it? How did it all come about?" said the old man. "You're—Eh?" laying his finger on the sleeve of his black coat. "Who's it for, eh?"

"My father," replied Nicholas.

"Ah!" said the old gentleman quickly. "Bad thing for a young man to lose his father. Widowed mother, perhaps?"

Nicholas sighed.

"Brothers and sisters, too? Eh?"

"One sister," rejoined Nicholas.

"Poor thing, poor thing! You're a scholar, too, I dare say?" said the old man, looking wistfully into the face of the young one.

"I have been tolerably well educated," said Nicholas.

"Fine thing," said the old gentleman: "education is a great thing, a very great thing! I never had any. I admire it the more in others. Tell me more of your history."

There was something so earnest and guileless in the way in which all this was said, that Nicholas could not resist it. He ran over the main points of his little history without reserve, merely suppressing names. The old man listened with great attention, and when he had concluded, drew his arm eagerly through his own.

"Don't say another word. Not another word!" said he. "Come along with me. We mustn't lose a minute."

So saying, the old gentleman dragged him back into Oxford Street, and hailing an omnibus on its way to the city, pushed Nicholas in before him, and followed himself.

The old gentleman got out with great alacrity, when they reached the Bank, and once more taking Nicholas by the arm, hurried him along Threadneedle Street, and through some lanes and passages on the right, until they, at length emerged in a quiet, shady little square. Into the oldest and cleanest looking house of business in the square he led the way. The only inscription on the door was "Cheeryble Brothers," but from a hasty glance in the direction of some packages which were lying about, Nicholas supposed that the Brothers Cheeryble were German merchants.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BETTER DAYS SEEM TO DAWN UPON NICHOLAS AND HIS FAMILY

ASSING through a warehouse which presented every indication of a thriving business, Mr. Cheeryble (for such Nicholas supposed him to be, from the respect which had been shown him by the warehouse porters whom they passed) led him into a little partitioned-off counting-house like a large glass case, in which counting-house there sat—as free from dust and blemish as if he had been fixed into the glass case before the top was put on, and had never come out since—a fat, elderly, large-faced clerk, with silver spectacles and a powdered head.

“Is my brother in his room, Tim?” said Mr. Cheeryble, with no less kindness of manner than he had shown to Nicholas.

“Yes, sir, he is,” replied the fat clerk, turning his spectacled glasses towards his principal, and his eyes towards Nicholas. “but Mr. Trimmers is with him.”

“Ay! And what has he come about, Tim?” said Mr. Cheeryble.

“He is getting up a subscription for a widow and family of a man who was killed in the East India Docks this morning, sir,” rejoined Tim. “Smashed, sir, by a cask of sugar.”

“He is a good creature,” said Mr. Cheeryble, with great earnestness. “He is a kind soul. I am very much obliged to Trimmers. Trimmers is one of the best friends we have. He makes a thousand cases known to us that we should never discover of ourselves. I am *very* much obliged to Trimmers.” Saying which, Mr. Cheeryble rubbed his hands with infinite delight, and Mr. Trimmers happening to pass the door that instant, on his way out, shot out after him and caught him by the hand.

"I owe you a thousand thanks, Trimmers, ten thousand thanks. I take it very friendly of you, very friendly indeed," said Mr. Cheeryble, dragging him into a corner to get out of hearing. "How many children are there, and what has my brother Ned given, Trimmers?"

"There are six children, and your brother Ned has given us twenty pounds."

"My brother Ned is a good fellow, and you're a good fellow, too, Trimmers," said the old man, shaking him by both hands with trembling eagerness. "Put me down for another twenty—or—stop a minute, stop a minute! We mustn't look ostentatious; put me down ten pound, and Tim Linkinwater ten pound. A cheque for twenty pound for Mr. Trimmers, Tim. Smashed by a cask of sugar, and six poor children—oh, dear, dear, dear!"

Talking on this strain as fast as he could, to prevent any friendly remonstrances from the collector of the subscriptions on the large amount of his donation, Mr. Cheeryble led Nicholas, equally astonished and affected by what he had seen and heard in this short space, to the half-opened door of another room.

"Brother Ned," said Mr. Cheeryble, tapping with his knuckles, and stooping to listen, "are you busy, my dear brother, or can you spare time for a word or two with me?"

"Brother Charles, my dear fellow," replied a voice from the inside; so like in its tone to that which had just spoken, that Nicholas started and almost thought it was the same, "don't ask me such a question, but come in directly."

They went in, without further parley. What was the amazement of Nicholas when his conductor advanced, and exchanged a warm greeting with another old gentleman, the very type and model of himself.

"Brother Ned," said Nicholas' friend, closing the door, "here is a young friend of mine whom we must assist. We must make proper inquiries into his statements, in justice to him as well as to ourselves, and if they are confirmed—as I feel assured they will be—we must assist him, we must assist him, brother Ned."

"It is enough, my dear brother, that you say we should," replied the other. "When you say that, no further inquiries are needed. He *shall* be assisted. What are his necessities, and what does he require? Where is Tim Linkinwater? Let us have him here?"

"Stop, stop, stop!" said brother Charles, taking the other aside. "I've a plan, my dear brother, I've a plan. Tim is getting old, and Tim has been a faithful servant, brother Ned. If we could lighten Tim's duties and prevail upon him to go into the country now and then, and sleep in the fresh air, two or three times a week, old Tim Linkinwater would grow young again in time."

The twins pressed each other's hands in silence; and brother Charles related the particulars he had heard from Nicholas. The conversation which ensued was a long one, and when it was over, a secret conference of almost equal duration took place between brother Ned and Tim Linkinwater in another room.

At length brother Ned and Tim Linkinwater came back together, when Tim instantly walked up to Nicholas and whispered in his ear a very brief sentence, (for Tim was ordinarily a man of few words) that he had taken down the address in the Strand, and would call upon him that evening, at eight.

"Tim," said brother Charles, "you understand that we have an intention of taking this young gentleman into the counting-house?"

Brother Ned remarked that Tim was aware of that intention, and quite approved of it; Tim having nodded, and said he did, drew himself up and looked particularly fat and very important. After which there was a profound silence.

"I am not coming an hour later in the morning, you know," said Tim, breaking out all at once, and looking very resolute. "I am not going to sleep in the fresh air; no, nor I'm not going into the country either. A pretty thing at this time of day, certainly. Pho! There's not such a view in England as the view out of my window. I have slept in that room," added Tim, sinking his voice a little, "for four-and-forty year; and if it wasn't inconvenient, and didn't interfere with business, I should request leave to die there."

"Tim Linkinwater, how dare you talk about dying?" roared the twins by one impulse, and blowing their old noses violently.

"That's what I've got to say, Mr. Edwin and Mr. Charles," said Tim, squaring his shoulders again. "This isn't the first time you've talked about superannuating me; but, if you please, we'll make it the last, and drop the subject forever."

With these words, Tim Linkinwater stalked out, and shut himself up in his glass case, with the air of a man who had had his say, and was thoroughly resolved not to be put down.

The brothers interchanged looks, and coughed some half-dozen times without speaking.

"He must be done something with, brother Ned," said the other warmly; "we must disregard his old scruple. He must be made a partner, brother Ned."

"Quite right," replied brother Ned, nodding his head as a man thoroughly determined; "quite right, my dear brother. If he won't listen to reason, we must do it against his will. We must quarrel with him, brother Charles."

"We must. We certainly must have a quarrel with Tim Linkinwater," said the other. "But in the mean time, my dear brother, we are keeping our young friend, and the poor lady and her daughter will be anxious for his return. So let us say good-bye for the present, and—there, there—take care of that box, my dear sir—and—no, no, no, not a word now—be careful of the crossings and——"

And with any disjointed and unconnected words which would prevent Nicholas from pouring forth his thanks, the brothers hurried him out, shaking hands with him all the way.

To recount all the delight and wonder which the circumstances just detailed awakened at Miss La Creevy's, and all the things that were done, said, thought, expected, hoped, and prophesied in consequence, is beside the present course and purpose of these adventures. It is sufficient to state, in brief, that Mr. Timothy Linkinwater arrived, punctual to his appointment; that, oddity as he was, and jealous as he was bound to be, of the proper exercise of his employer's



Smike makes the garden at the Nickleby cottage.—Page 56

most comprehensive liberality, he reported strongly and warmly in favor of Nicholas; and that, next day, he was appointed to the vacant stool in the counting-house of Cheeryble Brothers, with a present salary of one hundred and twenty pounds a year.

“And I think, my dear brother,” said Nicholas’ first friend, “that if we were to let them have that little cottage at Bow which is empty, at something under the usual rent, now? Eh, brother Ned?”

“For nothing at all,” said brother Ned. “We are rich, and should be ashamed to touch the rent under such circumstances as these.”

“Perhaps it would be better to say something, brother Ned,” suggested the other, mildly; “it would help to preserve habits of frugality, you know, and remove any painful sense of overwhelming obligations. We might say fifteen pound, or twenty pound, and if it was punctually paid, make it up to them in some other way. And I might secretly advance a small loan towards a little furniture, and you might secretly advance another small loan, brother Ned; and if we find them doing well—as we shall; there’s no fear, no fear—we can change the loans into gifts. Carefully, brother Ned, and by degrees, and without pressing upon them too much; what do you say now, brother?”

Ned gave his brother his hand upon it, and not only said it should be done, but had it done too; and in one short week, Nicholas took possession of the stool, and Mrs. Nickleby and Kate took possession of the house, and all was hope, bustle, and light-heartedness.

There surely never was such a week of discoveries and surprises as the first week of that cottage. Every night when Nicholas came home, something new had been found out. Then there was Miss La Creevy, who had come out in the omnibus to stop a day or two and help, and Mrs. Nickleby, who talked incessantly, and did something now and then, but not often—and Kate, who busied herself noiselessly everywhere, and was pleased with everything—and Smike, who made the garden a perfect wonder to look upon—and Nicholas, who helped and encouraged them every one—all the peace and cheerfulness of home restored, with such new zest imparted to every fru-

gal pleasure, and such delight to every hour of meeting, as misfortune and separation alone could give.

In short, the poor Nicklebys were social and happy, while the rich Nickleby was alone and miserable.

CHAPTER EIGHT

RALPH NICKLEBY CUTS AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

 HERE are some men who, living with the one object of enriching themselves, no matter by what means, and being perfectly conscious of the baseness and rascality of the means which they will use every day towards this end, affect nevertheless—even to themselves—a high tone of moral rectitude, and shake their heads and sigh over the depravity of the world.

Ralph Nickleby was not a man of this stamp. Stern, unyielding, dogged, and impenetrable, Ralph cared for nothing in life, or beyond it, save the gratification of two passions: avarice, the first and predominant appetite of his nature, and hatred, the second.

It was evening before a long round of business visits (interrupted only by a scanty dinner at an eating-house) terminated at Pimlico, and Ralph walked along St. James' Park on his way home.

The sky had been lowering and dark for some time, and the commencement of a violent storm of rain drove Ralph for shelter to a tree. He was leaning against it, with folded arms, still buried in thought, when, happening to raise his eyes, he suddenly met those of a man, who, creeping round the trunk, peered into his face with a searching look. There was something in his expression at the minute, which the man appeared to remember well, for it decided him; and stepping close up to Ralph, he pronounced his name.

Astonished for the moment, Ralph fell back a couple of paces and

surveyed him from head to foot. A spare, dark, withered man, of about his own age, with a stooping body, and a very sinister face rendered more ill-favored by hollow and hungry cheeks deeply sunburnt, and thick black eyebrows, blacker in contrast with the perfect whiteness of his hair; roughly clothed in shabby garments, of a strange and uncouth make, and having about him an indefinable manner of depression and degradation—this, for a moment was all he saw. But he looked again, and the face and person seemed gradually to grow less strange, to change as he looked, to subside and soften into lineaments that were familiar, until at last they resolved themselves, as if by some strange optical illusion, into those of one whom he had known for many years, and forgotten and lost sight of for nearly as many more.

The man saw that the recognition was mutual, and beckoning to Ralph to take his former place under the tree, and not to stand in the falling rain—of which, in his first surprise, he had been quite regardless—addressed him in a hoarse, faint tone.

“You would hardly have known me from my voice, I suppose, Mr. Nickleby,” he said.

“No,” returned Ralph, bending a severe look upon him. “There is something in that, though, that I remember now.”

“There is little in me that you can call to mind as having been there eight years ago, I dare say?” observed the other.

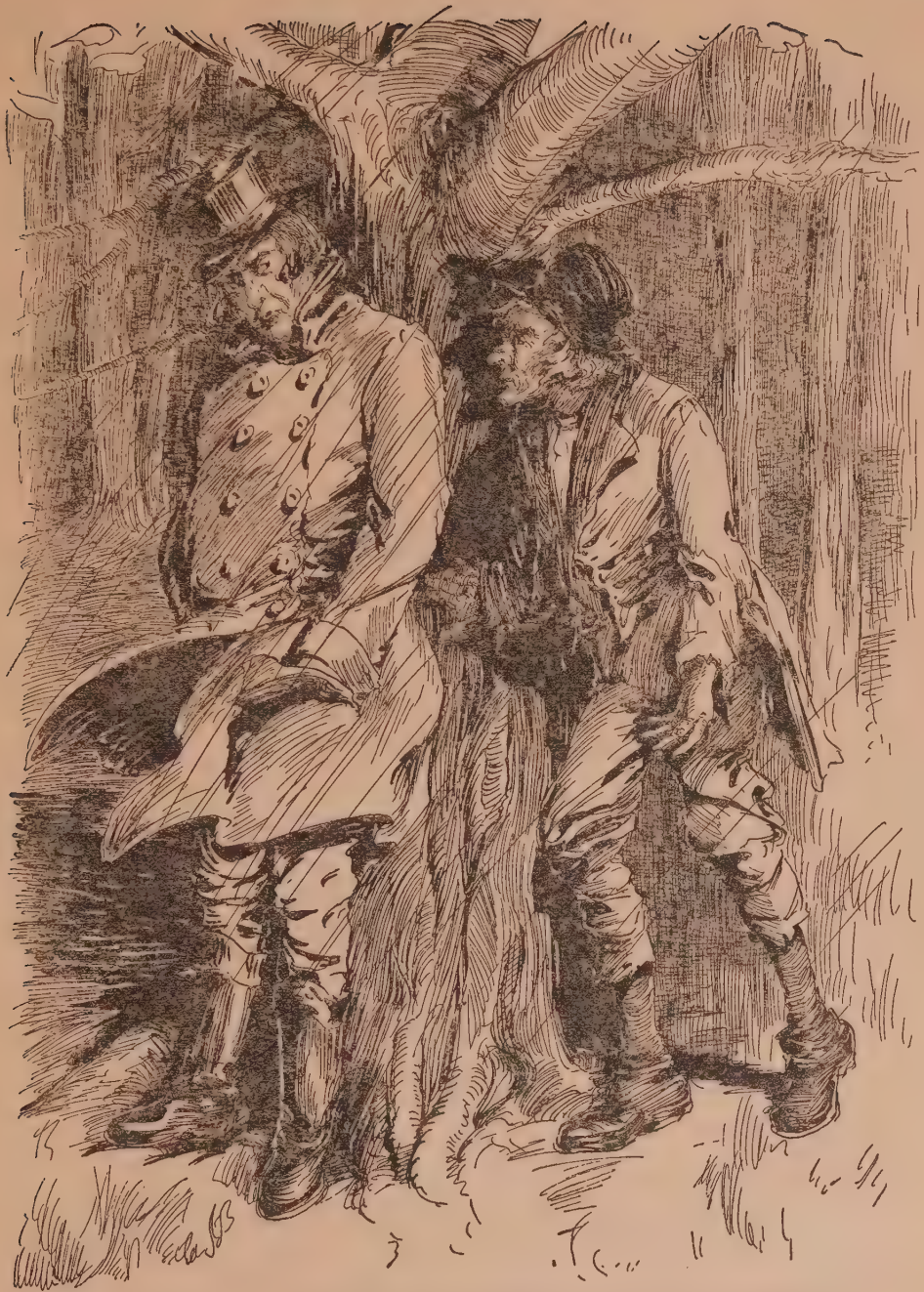
“Quite enough,” said Ralph, carelessly, and averting his face. “More than enough.”

“Mr. Nickleby,” said the man, bluntly, after a brief pause, during which he had seemed to struggle with an inclination to answer him by some reproach, “will you hear a few words that I have to say?”

“I am obliged to wait here till the rain holds a little,” said Ralph, looking abroad. “If you talk, sir, I shall not put my fingers in my ears, though your talking may have as much effect as if I did.”

“I am a most miserable and wretched outcast, nearly sixty years old, and as destitute and helpless as a child of six.”

“I am sixty years old, too,” replied Ralph, “and am neither desti-



A mysterious acquaintance accosts Ralph in the Park.—Page 58

tute nor helpless. Work. Don't make fine play-acting speeches about bread, but earn it."

"How?" cried the other. "Where? Show me the means. Will you give them to me?"

"I did once," replied Ralph, composedly, "you scarcely need ask me whether I will again. You were useful then; not too honest, not too delicate, not too nice of hand or heart; but useful."

"Useful, indeed!" said the man. "Come! You had pinched and ground me down for some years before that, but I had served you faithfully up to that time, in spite of all your dog's usage. Had I?"

Ralph made no reply.

"Had I?" said the man again.

"You had had your wages," rejoined Ralph, "and done had your work. We stood on equal ground so far, and could both cry quits."

"Then, but not afterwards," said the other.

"Not afterwards, certainly, nor even then, for (as you have just said) you owed me money, and do still," replied Ralph.

"That's not all," said the man, eagerly, "That's not all! Mark that! I didn't forget that old sore, trust me. Partly in remembrance of that, and partly in the hope of making money some day by the scheme, I took advantage of my position about you, and possessed myself of a hold upon you, which you would give half of all you have, to know, and never can know but through me. I left you—long after that time, remember—and, for some poor trickery that came within the law, but was nothing to what you money-makers daily practise just outside its bounds, was sent away a convict for seven years. I have returned what you see me. Now, Mr. Nickleby," said the man, with a strange mixture of humility and sense of power, "what help and assistance will you give me; what bribe, to speak out plainly? My expectations are not monstrous, but I must live, and to live I must eat and drink. Money is on your side, and hunger and thirst are on mine. You may drive an easy bargain."

"Is that all?" said Ralph, still eyeing his companion with the same steady look, and moving nothing but his lips.

"It depends on you, Mr. Nickleby, whether that's all or not," was the rejoinder.

"Why then, harkye, Mr ——, I don't know by what name to call you," said Ralph.

"By my old one, if you like."

"Then harkye, Mr. Brooker," said Ralph, in his harshest accents, "and don't expect to draw another speech from me. Harkye, sir. I know you of old for a ready scoundrel, but you never had a stout heart; and hard work, with (maybe) chains upon those legs of yours, and shorter food than when I 'pinched' and 'ground' you, has blunted your wits, or you would not come with such a tale as this to me. You a hold upon me! Keep it or publish it to the world, if you like."

"Are those of your own name dear to you?" said the man emphatically. "If they are——"

"They are not," returned Ralph, exasperated at this perseverance, and the thought of Nicholas, which the last question awakened. "They are not. If you had come as a common beggar, I might have thrown a sixpence to you in remembrance of the clever knave you used to be; but since you try to palm these stale tricks upon one you might have known better, I'll not part with a halfpenny—nor would I to save you from rotting. There's my answer to your trash."

With a disdainful scowl at the object of his anger, who met his eye but uttered not a word, Ralph walked away at his usual pace, without manifesting the slightest curiosity to see what became of his late companion, or indeed once looking behind him. The man remained on the same spot with his eyes fixed upon the retreating figure until it was lost to view, and then, drawing his arms about his chest, as if the damp and lack of food struck coldly to him, lingered with slouching steps by the wayside and begged of those who passed along.

CHAPTER NINE

AN ATTEMPT TO RESTORE A PARENT HIS CHILD

URING the next two weeks, all the spare hours of Nicholas, late at night and early in the morning, were incessantly devoted to acquiring the mysteries of book-keeping and some other forms of mercantile account. To these he applied himself with such steadiness and perseverance that he found himself, at the end of a fortnight, in a condition to report his proficiency to Mr. Linkinwater, and to claim his promise, that he, Nicholas Nickleby, should now be allowed to assist him in his graver labors.

It was a sight to behold Tim Linkinwater slowly bring out a massive ledger and day book, and, after turning them over and over, and affectionately dusting their backs and sides, open the leaves here and there, and cast his eyes, half-mournfully, half-proudly, upon the fair and unblotted entries.

Tim Linkinwater seemed to think that Mr. Nickleby was not sufficiently impressed with the deep and awful nature of his undertaking. Suppose there should be any mistake, any scratching out!

Young men are adventurous. It is extraordinary what they will rush upon, sometimes. Without even taking the precaution of sitting himself down upon his stool, but standing leisurely at the desk, and with a smile upon his face—actually a smile—there was no mistake about it; Mr. Linkinwater mentioned it afterwards—Nicholas dipped his pen into the inkstand before him, and plunged into the books of Cheeryble Brothers!

Tim Linkinwater turned pale, and, tilting up his stool on the two legs nearest Nicholas, looked over his shoulder in breathless anxiety. Brother Charles and brother Ned entered the counting-house and



Nicholas begins keeping books for Cheeryble Brothers.—Page 62

looked on with smiling faces, but Tim Linkinwater smiled not, nor moved for some minutes. At length, he drew a long, slow breath, and glanced at brother Charles, secretly pointed with the feather of his pen towards Nicholas, and nodded his head in a grave and resolute manner, plainly signifying, "He'll do."

Brother Charles exchanged a laughing look with brother Ned; but, just then, Nicholas stopped to refer to some other page, and Tim Linkinwater, unable to contain his satisfaction any longer, descended from his stool and caught him rapturously by the hand.

"He has done it!" said Tim, looking round at his employers and shaking his head triumphantly. "His capital B's and D's are exactly like mine. He dots all his small i's and crosses every t as he writes it. There ain't such a young man as this in all London," said Tim, clapping Nicholas on the back; "not one. Don't tell me! The City can't produce his equal. I challenge the City to do it!"

Mr. Frank Cheeryble, a nephew of the brothers, arrived home from Germany about this time. He was a sprightly, good-humored, pleasant fellow, with much both in his countenance and disposition that reminded Nicholas very strongly of the kind-hearted brothers. His manner was as unaffected as theirs, and his demeanor full of that heartiness which, to most people who have anything generous in their composition, is peculiarly prepossessing. Add to this, that he was good looking and intelligent, had a plentiful share of vivacity, was extremely cheerful, and it will be a source of no great wonder that he produced a most favorable impression upon Nicholas, who quickly arrived at the conclusion that he had laid the foundation of a most desirable acquaintance.

Kate Nickleby had by this time, begun to enjoy a settled feeling of tranquillity and happiness, to which she had long been a stranger. Living under the same roof with the beloved brother from whom she had been so suddenly and hardly separated, she seemed to have passed into a new state of being. Her former cheerfulness was now restored, her step regained its elasticity and lightness, and she looked more beautiful than ever.

Such was the result to which Miss La Creevy's observations led her, when the cottage had been, as she emphatically said, "thoroughly got to rights, from the chimney-pots to the street-door scraper," and the busy little woman had at length a moment's time to think about its inmates.

"Which, I declare, I haven't had since I first came down here," said Miss La Creevy; "for I have thought of nothing but hammers, nails, screw-drivers, and gimlets, morning, noon, and night."

"You never bestow one thought upon yourself, I believe," replied Kate, smiling.

"Upon my word, my dear, when there are so many pleasanter things to think of, I should be a goose if I did," said Miss La Creevy.

"By the by, I have thought of somebody, too. Do you know, that I observe a great change in one of this family—a very extraordinary change?"

"In whom?" asked Kate, anxiously. "Not in—"

"Not in your brother, my dear," returned Miss La Creevy, anticipating the close of the sentence, "for he is always the same affectionate, good-natured, clever creature, with a spice of the—I won't say who—in him when there's occasion, that he was when first I knew you. No. Smike, as he *will* be called, poor fellow! for he won't hear of a *Mr.* before his name, is greatly altered, even in this short time."

"How?" asked Kate, anxiously. "Not in health?"

"N-n-o; perhaps not in health exactly," said Miss La Creevy, pausing to consider, "although he is worn and thin and a feeble creature, and has that in his face which it would wring my heart to see in yours. No; not in health."

"How then?"

"I scarcely know," said the miniature painter. "But I have been watching him, and he has brought the tears into my eyes many times. It is not a very difficult matter to do that, certainly, for I am easily melted; still I think these came with good cause and reason. I am sure that since he has been here, he has grown, from some strong

cause, more conscious of his weak intellect. He feels it more. It gives him greater pain to know that he wanders sometimes, and can not understand very simple things. I have watched him, when you have not been by, my dear, sit brooding by himself, with such a look of pain as I could scarcely bear to see, and then get up and leave the room: so sorrowfully, and in such dejection, that I can not tell how it has hurt me. Not three weeks ago, he was a light-hearted, busy creature, overjoyed to be in a bustle, and as happy as the day was long. Now he is another being—the same willing, harmless, faithful, loving creature—but the same in nothing else.”

“Surely this will all pass off,” said Kate. “Poor fellow!”

One evening the family were assembled at the cottage, talking merrily, when there was heard a loud and violent knocking at the street-door; so loud and so violent that the ladies started as by one accord.

“It must be some mistake,” said Nicholas, carelessly. “We know nobody who would come here at this hour.”

Mrs. Nickleby surmised, however, that perhaps the counting-house was burnt down, or perhaps the Messrs. Cheeryble had sent to take Nicholas into partnership (which certainly appeared highly probable at that time of night), or perhaps Mr. Linkinwater had run away with the property, or perhaps Miss La Creevy were taken ill, or perhaps—

But a hasty exclamation from Kate stopped her abruptly in her conjectures, and Ralph Nickleby walked into the room.

“Stay,” said Ralph, as Nicholas rose, and Kate, making her way towards him, threw herself upon his arm. “Before that boy says a word hear me.”

Nicholas bit his lip and shook his head in a threatening manner, but appeared for the moment unable to articulate a syllable. Kate clung closer to his arm, Smeke retreated behind them.

Ralph, turning to Mrs. Nickleby, but directing an eager glance at Kate, as if more anxious to watch his effect upon her, said:

“Now, ma’am, listen to me. I don’t imagine that you are a party to the doings of that boy of yours, because I don’t believe that under his control, you have the slightest will of your own, or that your

advice, your opinion, your wants, your wishes, anything which in nature and reason (or of what what use is your great experience ?) ought to weigh with him, has the slightest influence or weight whatever, or is taken for a moment into account."

Mrs. Nickleby shook her head and sighed, as if there were a good deal in that, certainly.

"For this reason," resumed Ralph, "I address myself to you, ma'am. For this reason, partly, and partly because I do not wish to be disgraced by the acts of a vicious stripling whom *I* was obliged to disown, and who, afterwards, in his boyish majesty feigns to—ha! ha!—to disown me, I present myself here to-night. I have another motive in coming; a motive of humanity. I come here," said Ralph, looking round with a biting and triumphant smile, and gloating and dwelling upon the words as if he were loath to lose the pleasure of saying them, "to restore a parent his child. Ay, sir," he continued, bending eagerly forward, and addressing Nicholas, as he marked the change of his countenance, "to restore a parent his child; his son, sir; trepanned, waylaid, and guarded at every turn by you, with the base design of robbing him some day of any little wretched pittance of which he might become possessed."

"In that you know you lie," said Nicholas, proudly.

"In this I know I speak the truth. I have his father here," said Ralph.

"Here!" sneered Squeers, stepping into the room from the passage where he had been waiting. "Do you hear that? Here! Didn't I tell you to be careful his father didn't turn up, and send him back to me? Why, his father's my friend; he's to come back to me directly, he is. Now, what do you say—eh!—now—come—what do you say to that—ain't you sorry you took so much trouble for nothing? Ain't you, ain't you?"

"You bear upon your body certain marks I gave you," said Nicholas, looking quietly away, "and may talk in acknowledgment of them as much as you please. You'll talk a long time before you rub them out, Mr. Squeers."

The estimable gentleman last named cast a hasty look at the table, as if he were prompted by this retort to throw a jug or bottle at the head of Nicholas; but he was interrupted in this design (if such design he had) by Ralph, who, touching him on the elbow, bade him tell the father that he might now appear and claim his son.

This being purely a labor of love, Mr. Squeers readily complied, and leaving the room for the purpose, almost immediately returned, supporting a sleek personage with an oily face, who, bursting from him, made straight up to Smike, and tucking the poor fellow's head under his arm in a most uncouth and awkward embrace, elevated his broadbrimmed-hat at arm's length in the air as a token of devout thanksgiving, exclaiming, meanwhile; "How little did I think of this here joyful meeting, when I saw him last! Oh, how little did I think it!"

"Be composed, sir," said Ralph, with a gruff expression of sympathy; "you have got him now."

"Got him! Oh, haven't I got him! Have I got him, though?" cried Mr. Snawley, scarcely able to believe it. "Yes, here he is, flesh and blood, flesh and blood."

The bystanders had been quite stupefied with amazement, while Nicholas had looked keenly from Snawley to Squeers, and from Squeers to Ralph, divided between his feelings of disgust, doubt, and surprise. At this juncture, Smike escaping from his father, fled to Nicholas and implored him, in most moving terms, never to give him up, but to let him live and die beside him.

"If you are this boy's father," said Nicholas, "look at the wreck he is, and tell me that you purpose to send him back to that loathsome den from which I brought him."

"Stop," interposed Ralph, as Snawley was about to speak. "Let us cut this matter short, and not bandy words here with hair-brained profligates. This is your son, as you can prove. And you, Mr. Squeers, you know this boy to be the same that was with you for so many years under the name of Smike. Do you?"

"Do I!" returned Squeers. "Don't I?"

"Good," said Ralph; "a very few words will be sufficient here. You had a son by your first wife, Mr. Snawley?"

"I had," replied that person, "and there he stands."

"We'll show that presently," said Ralph. "You and your wife were separated, and she had the boy to live with her, when he was a year old. You received a communication from her, when you had lived apart a year or two, that the boy was dead, and you belived what she told you?"

"Of course I did," returned Snawley. "Oh the joy of——"

"Be rational, sir, pray," said Ralph. "This is business and transports interfere with it. This wife died a year and a half ago, or thereabouts—not more—in some obscure place, where she was house-keeper in a family. Is that the case?"

"That's the case," replied Snawley.

"Having written on her death-bed a letter or confession to you about this very boy, which, as it was not directed otherwise than in your name, only reached you, and that by a circuitous course, a few days since?"

"Just so," said Snawley. "Correct in every particular, sir."

"And this confession," resumed Ralph, "is to the effect that his death was an invention of hers to wound you—was a part of a system of annoyance, in short, which you seem to have adopted towards each other—that the boy lived, but was of weak, imperfect intellect—that she sent him by a trusty hand to a cheap school in Yorkshire—that she paid for his education for some years, and then, being poor, and going far away, gradually deserted him, for which she prayed forgiveness?"

Snawley nodded his head and wiped his eyes; the first slightly; the last, violently.

"The school was Mr. Squeers'," continued Ralph; "the boy was left there in the name of Smike; every description was fully given, dates tally with Mr. Squeers' books. There, then," said Ralph, tossing a pocket-book upon the table, "let them see the documents if they like; and as those are the original papers, I should recommend

you to stand near while they are being examined, or you may chance to lose some."

With these words Ralph sat down unbidden, and compressing his lips, which were for the moment slightly parted by a smile, folded his arms, and looked for the first time at his nephew.

Nicholas, stung by the concluding taunt, darted an indignant glance at him; but commanding himself as well as he could, entered upon a close examination of the documents. There was nothing about them which could be called in question. The certificates were regularly signed as extracts from the parish books, the first letter had a genuine appearance of having been written and preserved for some years, the handwriting of the second tallied with it exactly, (making proper allowance for its having been written by a person in extremity) and there were several other corroboratory scraps of entries and memoranda which it was equally difficult to question.

"Dear Nicholas," whispered Kate, who had been looking anxiously over his shoulder, "can this be really the case? Is this statement true?"

"I fear it is," answered Nicholas.

"Well," said Squeers, "what's to be done? Them hackney-coach horses will catch cold if we don't think of moving; there's one of 'em sneezing now, so that he blows the street-door right open. What's the order of the day? Is Master Snawley to come along with us?"

"No, no, no," replied Smike, drawing back, and clinging to Nicholas. "No, pray, no. I will not go from you with him. No, no."

In the midst of a great noise, occasioned by the prayers and enties of Smike, the cries and exclamations of the women and the vehemence of the men, demonstrations were made of carrying off the lost son by violence. Squeers had actually begun to haul him out, when Nicholas (who until then had been evidently undecided how to act) took him by the collar, and shaking him so that such teeth as he had chattered in his head, politely escorted him to the room door, and thrusting him into the passage, shut it upon him.

"Now," said Nicholas to the other two, "have the kindness to follow your friend."

"I want my son," said Snawley.

"Your son," replied Nicholas, "chooses for himself. He chooses to remain here, and he shall."

"You won't give him up?" said Snawley.

"I would not give him up against his will, to be the victim of such brutality as that to which you would consign him," replied Nicholas, "if he were a dog or a rat."

"Knock that Nickleby down with a candlestick," cried Mr. Squeers, through the keyhole, "and bring out my hat, somebody, will you, unless he wants to steal it."

"You, sir," said Snawley, addressing the terrified Smike, "are an unnatural, ungrateful, unloveable boy. You won't let me love you when I want to. Won't you come home, won't you?"

"No, no, no," cried Smike, shrinking back.

"He never loved nobody," bawled Squeers, through the keyhole. "He never loved me; he never loved Wackford, who is next door to a cherubim. How can you expect that he'll love his father? He'll never love his father, he won't. He don't know what it is to have a father. He don't understand it. It ain't in him."

Mr. Snawley looked steadfastly at his son for a full minute, and then covering his eyes with his hand, and once more raising his hat in the air, appeared deeply occupied in deploring his black ingratitude. Then drawing his arm across his eyes, he picked up Mr. Squeers' hat, and taking it under one arm, and his own under the other, walked slowly out.

"Your romance, sir," said Ralph, lingering for a moment, "is destroyed, I take it. No unknown; no persecuted descendant of a man of high degree; the weak, imbecile son of a poor, petty tradesman. We shall see how your sympathy melts before plain matter of fact."

"You shall see," said Nicholas, motioning toward the door.

Ralph Nickleby withdrew. But Mr. Squeers, who was by this

time wound up to a pitch of impotent malignity almost unprecedented, could not refrain from returning to the parlor door, and actually cutting some dozen capers with various wry faces and hideous grimaces, expressive of his triumphant confidence in the downfall of Nicholas.

This confidence of Mr. Squeers evaporated to some degree upon reflection, as may be seen from some remarks of his made to Ralph subsequently.

"This here business regarding of that ungrateful and hard-hearted chap, Snawley junior, puts me out of my way, and occasions a inconveniency quite unparalled; besides, as I may say, making for whole weeks together, Mrs. Squeers a perfect widder. It's a pleasure to me to act with you, of course."

"Of course," said Ralph, dryly.

"Yes, I say of course," resumed Mr. Squeers, rubbing his knees; "but at the same time, when one comes, as I do now, better than two hundred and fifty mile to take a afferdavid, it does put a man out a good deal, letting alone the risk."

"How often have I told you," said Ralph, "and how often am I to tell you, that you run no risk? What have you sworn but that at such and such a time a boy was left with you by the name of Smike; that he was at your school for a given number of years, was lost under such and such circumstances, is now found, and has been identified by you in such and such keeping. This is all true; is it not?"

"Yes," replied Squeers, "that's all true."

"Well, then," said Ralph, "what risk do you run. Who swears to a lie but Snawley; a man whom I have paid much less than I have you?"

"He certainly did it cheap, did Snawley," observed Squeers.

"He did it cheap!" retorted Ralph, testily, "yes, and he did it well, and carries it off with a hypocritical face and a sanctified air, but you! Risk! What do you mean by risk? The certificates are all genuine. Snawley *had* another son, he *has* been married twice,

his first wife *is* dead, none but her ghost could tell that she didn't write that letter, none but Snawley himself can tell this is not his son, and that his son is food for worms! The only perjury is Snawley's, and I fancy he is pretty well used to it. Talk of your risk in the conspiracy!"

"I say, " remonstrated Squeers, looking uneasily round; "don't call it that! Just as a favor, don't."

"Call it what you like," said Ralph, irritably, "but attend to me. This tale was originally fabricated as a means of annoyance against one who hurt your trade and half cudgelled you to death, and to enable you to obtain possession of a half-dead drudge, whom you wished to regain, because you knew that the knowledge that he was again in your power would be the best punishment you could inflict upon your enemy. Is that so, Mr. Squeers?"

"Why, sir," returned Squeers, "in a measure it was."

"What does that mean?" said Ralph.

"Why, in a measure means," returned Squeers, "as it may be, that it wasn't all on my account, because you had some grudge to satisfy, too."

"If I had not had," said Ralph, in no way abashed by the reminder, "do you think I should have helped you?"

"Why, no, I don't suppose you would," Squeers replied. "I only wanted that point to be all square and straight between us."

"How can it ever be otherwise?" retorted Ralph. "Except that the account is against me, for I spend money to gratify my hatred, and you pocket it, and gratify yours at the same time. You are, at least, as avaricious as you are revengeful. So am I. Which is best off? You, who win money and revenge at the same time and by the same process, and who are, at all events, sure of money, if not of revenge, or I, who am sure only of spending money in any case, and can but win bare revenge at last?"

As Mr. Squeers could only answer this proposition by shrugs and smiles, Ralph bade him be silent, and thankful that he was so well off.

CHAPTER TEN

A CONFIDENTIAL AND DELICATE MISSION

FTER an anxious consideration of the painful and embarrassing position in which he was placed Nicholas decided that he ought to lose no time in frankly stating it to the kind brothers. Availing himself of the first opportunity of being alone with Mr. Charles Cheeryble at the close of next day, he accordingly related Smike's little history, and modestly but firmly expressed his hope that the good old gentleman would, under such circumstances as he described, hold him justified in adopting the extreme course of interfering as he had done, between parent and child, and upholding the latter in his disobedience; even though his horror and dread of his father might seem, and would doubtless be represented as, a thing so repulsive and unnatural, as to render those who countenanced him in it, fit objects of general detestation and abhorrence.

"So deeply rooted does this horror of the man appear to be," said Nicholas, "that I can hardly believe he really is his son."

"I dare say you are surprised, my dear sir, that I have listened to your recital with so little astonishment," said brother Charles. "That is easily explained. Your uncle has been here this morning."

Nicholas colored and drew back a step or two.

"Yes," said the old gentleman, tapping his desk emphatically, "here in this room. He would listen neither to reason, feeling, nor justice. But brother Ned was hard upon him; brother Ned, sir, might have melted a paving stone."

"He came to——" said Nicholas.

"To complain of you," returned brother Charles, "to poison our ears with calumnies and falsehoods; but he came on a fruitless errand

and went away with some wholesome truths in his ears besides. Brother Ned, my dear Mr. Nickleby—brother Ned, sir, is a perfect lion. So is Tim Linkinwater; Tim is quite a lion. We had Tim in to face him at first, and Tim was at him, sir, before you could say ‘Jack Robinson.’ ”

“How can I ever thank you for all the deep obligations you every day impose upon me ?” said Nicholas.

“By keeping silence upon the subject, my dear sir,” returned brother Charles. “You shall be righted. At least you shall not be wronged. Nobody belonging to you shall be wronged. They shall not hurt a hair of your head, or the boy’s head, or your mother’s head, or your sister’s head. I have seen the father—if he is the father—and I suppose he must be. He is a barbarian and a hypocrite, Mr. Nickleby. I told him, ‘You are a barbarian, sir.’ And I’m glad of it, I am *very* glad I told him he was a barbarian, very glad indeed!”

By this time brother Charles was in such a very warm state of indignation, that Nicholas thought he might venture to put in a word; but the moment he essayed to do so, Mr. Cheeryble laid his hand softly upon his arm, and pointed to a chair.

“This subject is at an end for the present,” said the old gentleman, wiping his face. “Don’t revive it by a single word. I am going to speak upon another subject, a confidential subject, Mr. Nickleby. We must be cool again; we must be cool.”

After two or three turns across the room he resumed his seat, and said:

“I am about to employ you, my dear sir, on a confidential and delicate mission.”

“You might employ many a more able messenger, sir,” said Nicholas, “but a more trustworthy or zealous one, I may be bold to say you could not find.”

“Of that I am well assured,” returned brother Charles, “well assured. You will give me credit for thinking so, when I tell you, that the object of the mission is a young lady. She is the daughter

of a lady whom, when she was a beautiful young girl herself, and I was very many years younger, I—it seems a strange word for me to utter now—I loved very dearly. You will smile, perhaps, to hear a gray-headed man talk about such things. You will not offend me, for when I was as young as you, I dare say I should have done the same.”

“I have no such inclination, indeed,” said Nicholas.

“My dear brother Ned,” continued Mr. Cheeryble, “was to have married her sister, but she died. She is dead too now, and has been for many years. She married her choice, and I wish I could add that her after-life was as happy, as God knows, I ever prayed it might be.”

A short silence intervened, which Nicholas made no effort to break.

“If I had been poor,” said brother Charles, with sparkling eyes; “if I had been poor, Mr. Nickleby, my dear sir, which thank God I am not, I would have denied myself (of course anybody would under such circumstances) the commonest necessities of life to help her daughter. As it is, the task is a difficult one. If her father were only dead, nothing could be easier, for then she should share and cheer the happiest home that brother Ned and I could have, as if she were our child or sister. But he is still alive. Nobody can help him; that has been tried a thousand times; he was not abandoned by all without good cause, I know.”

“Can not she be persuaded to——” Nicholas hesitated when he had got thus far.

“To leave him?” said brother Charles. “Who could entreat a child to desert her parents?” Such entreaties, limited to her seeing him occasionally, have been urged upon her—not by me—but always with the same result.”

“Is he kind to her?” said Nicholas. “Does he requite her affection?”

“True kindness, considerate, self-denying kindness, is not in his nature,” returned Mr. Cheeryble. “Such kindness as he knows, he regards her with, I believe. The mother was a gentle, loving, confiding creature, and although he wounded her from their marriage till

her death as cruelly and wantonly as ever man did, she never ceased to love him. She commended him on her death-bed to her child's care. Her child has never forgotten it, and never will."

"Have you no influence over him?" asked Nicholas.

"I, my dear sir? The last man in the world. Such is his jealousy and hatred of me, that if he knew his daughter had opened her heart to me, he would make her life miserable with his reproaches, although if he knew that every penny she had came from me, he would not relinquish one personal desire that the most reckless expenditure of her scanty stock could gratify."

"An unnatural scoundrel!" said Nicholas, indignantly.

"We will use no harsh terms," said brother Charles, in a gentle voice: "but will accommodate ourselves to the circumstances in which this young lady is placed. Such assistance as I have prevailed upon her to accept, I have been obliged, at her own earnest request, to dole out in the smallest portions, lest he, finding how easily money was procured, should squander it even more lightly than he is wont to do. She has come to and fro, to and fro, secretly and by night, to take even this; and I can not bear that things should go on in this way, Mr. Nickleby, I really can not bear it."

Then it came out, little by little, how the twins had been revolving in their good old heads, manifold plans and schemes for helping this young lady in the most delicate and considerate way, and so her father should not suspect the source whence the aid was derived; and how they had at last come to the conclusion, that the best way would be to make a feint of purchasing her little drawings and ornamental work, at a high price, and keeping up a constant demand for the same. For the furtherance of which end and object it was necessary that somebody should represent the dealer in such commodities, and after great deliberation they had pitched upon Nicholas to support this character.

"He knows me," said brother Charles, "and he knows my brother Ned. Neither of us would do. Frank is a good fellow—a very fine fellow—but we are afraid that he might be a little flighty and thought-

less in such a delicate matter, and that he might, perhaps—that he might, in short, be too susceptible (for she is a beautiful creature, sir, just what her poor mother was), and falling in love with her before he well knew his own mind, carry pain and sorrow into that innocent breast, which we would be the humble instruments of gradually making happy. Well, then, you see,” continued brother Charles, “that *he* wouldn’t do. Tim Linkinwater is out of the question; for Tim, sir, is such a tremendous fellow, that he could never contain himself, but would go to loggerheads with the father before he had been in the place five minutes. Now, in you we repose the very strictest confidence; in you we have seen domestic virtues and affections, and delicacy of feeling, which exactly qualify you for such an office. And you are the man, sir.”

“The young lady,” said Nicholas, “is she a party to this innocent deceit?”

“Yes, yes,” returned Mr. Cheeryble; “at least she knows you come from us; she does *not* know, however, but we shall dispose of these little productions which you’ll purchase from time to time; and, perhaps, if you did it very well (that is, *very* well indeed), perhaps she might be brought to believe that we—that we made a profit on them.”

Mr. Cheeryble then proceeded to give Nicholas the needful credentials and directions for his first visit, which was to be made next morning; all preliminaries being arranged, and the strictest secrecy enjoined, he walked home for the night very thoughtfully indeed.

To the row of houses indicated to him by Mr. Charles Cheeryble, Nicholas directed his steps, and at length arrived. There were small gardens in front which, being wholly neglected in all other respects, served as little pens for the dust to collect in. Opening the rickety gate which dangled on its broken hinges before one of these, Nicholas knocked at the door with a faltering hand.

It was in truth a shabby house outside, with very dim parlor windows and a very small show of blinds, and very dirty muslin curtains dangling across the lower panes on very loose and limp strings.

Neither, when the door was opened, did the inside appear to belie the outward promise, as there was faded carpeting on the stairs and faded oil-cloth in the passage.

Upstairs and into a front room Nicholas was shown, and there, seated at a little table by the window, on which were drawing materials with which she was occupied, sat a beautiful girl who surrounded by all the strong interest which Nicholas attached to her story, seemed in his eyes, a thousand times more beautiful than he had ever yet supposed any one could be.

But how the graces and elegances which she had dispersed about the poorly furnished room went to the heart of Nicholas! Flowers, plants, birds, the harp, the old piano whose notes had sounded so much sweeter in bygone times; how many struggles it had cost to keep these two last links of that broken chain which bound her yet to home! With every slender ornament, the occupation of her leisure hours, replete with that graceful charm which lingers in every little tasteful work of woman's hands, how much patient endurance and how many gentle affections were entwined!

It is not to be supposed that Nicholas took in everything at one glance, for he had at first been unconscious of the presence of a sick man propped up with pillows in an easy chair, who moving restlessly and impatiently in his seat, now attracted his attention.

He was scarce fifty, perhaps, but so emaciated as to appear much older. His features presented the remains of a handsome countenance, but one in which the embers of strong and impetuous passions were easier to be traced than any expression which would have rendered a far plainer face much more prepossessing. His looks were very haggard, and his limbs and body literally worn to the bone, but there was something of the old fire in the large sunken eye notwithstanding, and it seemed to kindle afresh as he struck a thick stick, with which he seemed to have supported himself in his seat, impatiently on the floor twice or thrice, and called his daughter by name.

"Madeline, who is this? What does anybody want here? Who told a stranger we could be seen? What is it?"

"I believe——" the young lady began, as she inclined her head with an air of some confusion, in reply to the salutation of Nicholas.

"You always believe, " returned her father, petulantly. "What is it?"

By this time Nicholas had recovered sufficient presence of mind to speak for himself, so he said (as it had been agreed he should say) that he had called about a pair of hand-screens, and some painted velvet for an ottoman, both of which were required to be of the most elegant design possible, neither time nor expense being of the slightest consideration. He had also to pay for the two drawings, with many thanks, and, advancing to the little table, he laid upon it a bank note, folded in an envelope and sealed.

"See that the money is right, Madeline," said the father. "Open the paper, my dear."

"It is quite right, papa, I am sure."

"Here," said Mr. Bray, putting out his hand. "Let me see. Five pounds—well, is *that* right?"

"Quite," said Madeline, bending over him. She was so busily employed in arranging the pillows that Nicholas could not see her face, but as she stooped he thought he saw a tear fall.

"Ring the bell, ring the bell," said the sick man, with the same nervous eagerness, and motioning towards it with such a quivering hand that the bank note rustled in the air. "Tell her to get it changed, to get me a newspaper, to buy me some grapes, another bottle of the wine that I had last week—and—and—I forget half I want just now, but she can go out again. Let her get those first, those first. Now, Madeline, my love, quick, quick! Good God, how slow you are!"

"He remembers nothing that she wants!" thought Nicholas. Perhaps something of what he thought was expressed in his countenance, for the sick man turning towards him with great asperity, demanded to know if he waited for a receipt.

"It is no matter at all," said Nicholas.

"No matter! What do you mean, sir?" was the tart rejoinder.



Madeline gives Nicholas a receipt —Page 82

"No matter! Do you think you bring your paltry money here as a favor or a gift; or as a matter of business, and in return for value received? Sir, because you can't appreciate the time and taste which are bestowed upon the goods you deal in, do you think you give your money away? Do you know that you are talking to a gentleman, sir, who at one time could have bought up fifty such men as you and all you have? What do you mean?"

"I merely mean," said Nicholas, "that as I shall have many dealings with this lady, if she will kindly allow me, I will not trouble her with such forms."

"Then *I* mean, if you please, that we'll have as many forms as we can," returned the father. "My daughter, sir, requires no kindness from you or anybody else. Have the goodness to confine your dealings strictly to trade and business, and do not travel beyond it. Every petty tradesman is to begin to pity her now, is he? Upon my soul! Very pretty! Madeline, my dear, give him a receipt; and mind you always do so."

"When," said Nicholas, as he took the piece of paper, "when shall I call again?"

This was addressed to the daughter, but the father answered.

"When you are requested to call, sir, and not before. Don't worry and persecute. Madeline, my dear, when is this person to call again?"

"Oh, not for a long time, not for three or four weeks; it is not necessary, indeed; I can do without," said the young lady, with great eagerness.

"Why, how are we to do without?" urged the father, not speaking above his breath. "Three or four weeks, Madeline! Three or four weeks!"

"It is a long time, ma'am," said Nicholas

"*You* think so, do you?" retorted the father, angrily. "If I chose to beg, sir, and stoop to ask assistance from people I despise, three or four months would not be a long time; three or four years would not be a long time. Understand, sir, that is if I chose to be dependent; but as I don't, you may call in a week."

Nicholas bowed low to the young lady and retired. He heard a light footstep above him as he descended the stairs. Looking round, he saw that the young lady was standing there, and glancing timidly towards him, seemed to hesitate whether she should call him back or not. The best way of settling the question was to turn back at once, which Nicholas did.

"I don't know whether I do right in asking you, sir," said Madeline hurriedly, "but, pray, pray, do not mention to my poor mother's dear friends what has passed here to-day. He has suffered much, and is worse this morning. I beg you, sir, as a boon, a favor to myself."

"You have but to hint a wish," returned Nicholas, fervently, "and I would hazard my life to gratify it."

"You speak hastily, sir."

"Truly and sincerely," replied Nicholas. "Dear Madam, as I know your history, and feel as men and angels must who hear and see such things, I do beg you to believe that I would die to serve you."

The young lady turned away her head, and was plainly weeping.

"Forgive me," said Nicholas, with respectful earnestness, "if I seem to say too much, or to presume upon the confidence which has been entrusted to me. But I could not leave you as if my interest and sympathy expired with the commission of the day. I am your faithful servant, humbly devoted to you from this hour, devoted in strict truth and honor to him who sent me here, and in pure integrity of heart and distant respect for you."

She waved her hand, entreating him to be gone, but answered not a word. Nicholas could say no more, and silently withdrew. And thus ended his first interview with Madeline Bray.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHRONICLES FURTHER PROCEEDINGS OF THE NICKLEBY FAMILY



WHILE Nicholas, absorbed in the one engrossing subject of interest which had recently opened upon him, occupied his leisure hours with thoughts of Madeline Bray, and in the executions of the commission which the anxiety of brother Charles in her behalf imposed upon him, saw her again and again, and each time with greater danger to his peace of mind, Mrs. Nickleby and Kate continued to live in quiet, agitated by no other cares than those which were connected with certain harassing proceedings taken by Mr. Snawley for the recovery of his son, and their anxiety for Smike himself, whose health, long upon the wane, began to be so affected by apprehension and uncertainty as sometimes to occasion both them and Nicholas considerable uneasiness and even alarm.

It was no complaint or murmur on the part of the poor fellow himself that thus disturbed them. Ever eager to be employed in such slight service as he could render, and always anxious to repay his benefactors with cheerful and happy looks, less friendly eyes might have seen in him no cause for any misgiving. But there were times, and often too, when the sunken eye was too bright, the hollow cheek too flushed, the breathing too thick and heavy in its course, the frame too feeble and exhausted, to escape their regard and notice.

Nicholas, fearing that dread disease, consumption, carried his faithful companion to a physician of great repute. There was no cause for immediate alarm, he said. There were no present symptoms which could be deemed conclusive. The constitution had been greatly tried and injured in childhood, but still it *might* not be—and that was all.

But he seemed to grow no worse, and, as it was not difficult to find a reason for these symptoms of illness in the shock and agitation he had recently undergone, Nicholas comforted himself with the hope that his poor friend would soon recover. This hope his mother and sister shared with him; and as the object of their joint solicitude seemed to have no uneasiness or despondency for himself, but each day answered with a quiet smile that he felt better than he had the day before, their fears abated, and the general happiness was by degrees restored.

Many and many a time, in after years, did Nicholas look back to this period of his life and tread again the humble, quiet, homely scenes that rose up as of old before him. The little room in which they had so often sat long after it was dark, figuring such happy futures; Kate's cheerful voice and merry laugh; how, if she were from home, they used to sit and watch for her return, scarcely breaking silence but to say how dull it seemed without her; the glee with which poor Smike would start from the darkened corner where he used to sit, and hurry to admit her; and the tears they often saw upon his face, half wondering to see them, too, and he so pleased and happy; every little incident came fresh before him many and many a time.

If the brothers Cheeryble, as they found Nicholas worthy of trust and confidence, bestowed upon him every day some new and substantial mark of kindness, they were not less mindful of those who depended on him. Various little presents to Mrs. Nickleby, always of the very things most required, tended in no slight degree to the improvement and embellishment of the cottage. Kate's little store of trinkets became quite dazzling; and for company! If brother Ned and brother Charles failed to look in for at least a few minutes every Sunday, or one evening in the week, there was Mr. Tim Linkinwater (who had never made half a dozen other acquaintances in all his life, and who took such delight in his new friends as no words can express) constantly coming and going in his evening walks, and stopping to rest; while Mr. Frank Cheeryble happened, by some strange con-

junction of circumstances, to be passing the door on some business or other at least three nights in the week.

"He is the most attentive young man *I* ever saw, Kate," said Mrs. Nickleby to her daughter one evening, when this last-named gentleman had been the subject of the worthy woman's eulogium for some time, and Kate sat perfectly silent.

"Attentive, mamma!" rejoined Kate.

"Bless my heart, Kate!" cried Mrs. Nickleby, with her wonted suddenness, "what a color you have; why, you're quite flushed!"

"Oh, mamma, what strange things you say and fancy."

"It wasn't fancy, Kate, my dear, I'm certain of that," returned her mother. "However, it's gone now at any rate, so it don't much matter whether it was or not. What was it we were talking about? Oh! Mr. Frank. I never saw such attention in *my* life."

Before Kate had returned any reply, a queer little double-knock announced that Miss La Creevy had called to see them; and when she presented herself, Mrs. Nickleby inquired if she had passed Nicholas on the road.

"I saw nothing of him," answered Miss La Creevy; "but I saw that dear old soul Mr. Linkinwater."

"Taking his evening walk, and coming to rest here before he turns back to the city, I'll be bound!" said Mrs. Nickleby.

"I should think he was," returned Miss La Creevy, "especially as young Mr. Cheeryble was with him."

"Surely that is no reason why Mr. Linkinwater should be coming here," said Kate.

"Why I think it is, my dear," said Miss La Creevy. "For I observe that he generally falls tired and requires a good long rest, when he has come as far as this."

Any further remarks on this theme were cut short by the arrival of Tim Linkinwater and Mr. Frank Cheeryble.

"I am so sorry Nicholas is not at home," said Mrs. Nickleby. "Kate, my dear, you must be both Nicholas and yourself."

"Miss Nickleby need be but herself," said Frank.

"Then at all events we shall press you to stay, " returned Mrs. Nickleby. "Mr. Linkinwater says ten minutes, but I can not let you go so soon; Nicholas would be very much vexed, I am sure. Kate, my dear!"

In obedience to a great number of nods, and winks, and frowns of extra significance, Kate added her entreaties that the visitors would remain; but it was observable that she addressed them exclusively to Tim Linkinwater; and there was, besides, a certain embarrassment in her manner, which, though it was as far from impairing its graceful character as the tinge it communicated to her cheek was from diminishing her beauty, was obvious at a glance, even to Mrs. Nickleby. Not being of a very speculative character, however, save under circumstances when her speculations could be put into words and uttered aloud, that discreet matron attributed the emotion to the circumstance of her daughter's not happening to have her best frock on: "though I never saw her look better, certainly," she said to herself at the same time.

Nicholas did not come home; but that circumstance, to say the truth, had no great effect upon the little party, who were all in the best humor possible. Indeed, there sprung up quite a flirtation between Miss La Creevy and Tim Linkinwater. Little Miss La Creevy rallied Tim on having remained a bachelor all his life with so much success, that Tim was actually induced to declare, that if he could get anybody to have him, he didn't know but what he might change his condition even yet. Miss La Creevy earnestly recommended a lady she knew, who would exactly suit Mr. Linkinwater, and had a very comfortable property of her own; but this latter qualification had very little effect. Tim manfully protested that fortune would be no object with him, but that true worth and cheerfulness of disposition were what a man should look for in a wife, and that if he had these, he could find money enough for the moderate wants of both. This all was said with a comical mixture of jest and earnest, and, leading to a great amount of laughter, made them very merry indeed.

This placid current of events was suddenly disturbed by a revelation made to Nicholas by Newman Noggs. Newman was in the habit of waiting now and then at a convenient place where he could see Nicholas on his way home, in order that they might keep each other informed concerning the movements of Ralph Nickleby and his tools. At one of these meetings, Newman told Nicholas of a plot he had overheard Ralph discussing with a decrepit old man named Arthur Gride, a grasping money-lender of the same stamp as Ralph himself.

Gride had found out that the beautiful daughter of a ruined gentleman, who in his days of extravagance had been a borrower from both Ralph and himself, was entitled to a large fortune, although neither she nor her father was aware of it. Gride wished to marry her in order to sweep her property into his own heap, and hoped to tempt her father to force the match by offering to put within his reach the means of again indulging his luxurious tastes.

Gride applied to Ralph for help, because, as he said, "I want a backer in this matter; one who can talk, and urge, and press a point, which you can do as no other man can. I can't do that, for I am a poor, timid, nervous creature. You'll stand, my friend, and help me, won't you?"

Ralph's demands for payment for his services were pronounced enormous by old Arthur Gride, but entreaties and protests had no effect on Ralph, and at length a treaty was made between the worthy pair; Arthur exacting the condition that Ralph should accompany him to the lodgings of the father and daughter that very hour, and open negotiations at once.

Newman had learned subsequently that the plot had prospered so well that the wedding was only a day off. He did not reveal all this with the idea that Nicholas was specially interested in the young lady, but regarded it as merely another instance of Ralph's villainy. But when it came out finally that the young lady's name was Bray—Madeline Bray—a storm of rage, astonishment, and indignation rushed through his listener's heart.

The suddenness with which the intelligence of the infamous plot came upon him, stunned and bewildered Nicholas; and the fact that both of the brothers were absent on business beyond the sea, at that time, placed him in a position of overwhelming responsibility. He knew it would be useless to appeal either to Ralph Nickleby or Mr. Bray. The only step he could think of that looked hopeful was to see Madeline herself, and entreat her to postpone the marriage at least until the return of the brothers.

With great difficulty he managed to obtain an opportunity to speak to her out of her father's presence. He urged her, with all the earnestness and fervor of which he was capable, to delay the marriage for one short week. He told her of the character of the men from whom the scheme had come, and exposed the web they were trying to wind about her. The exact nature of the fraud which Gride expected to work upon Madeline was not known to Nicholas, as the old man in his interview with Ralph had spoken too obscurely for Newman Noggs to obtain a clear idea of it.

Long before Nicholas ceased to speak, the young lady buried her face in her hands, and gave her tears free way. In a voice at first inarticulate with emotion, she answered him:

"I will not disguise from you, sir—though perhaps I ought—that I have undergone great pain of mind since I saw you last. I do *not* love this gentleman. This he knows, and knowing, still offers me his hand. By accepting it, and by that step alone, I can release my father who is dying in this place; prolong his life, perhaps for many years; restore him to comfort; and relieve a generous man from the burden of assisting one by whom his noble heart is little understood. I have passed my word. The interest you take in one so friendless and forlorn as I, the delicacy with which you have discharged your trust have my warmest thanks. But I do not repent. I am happy in the prospect of all I can achieve so easily."

"Your tears fall faster as you talk of happiness," said Nicholas. "Defer this marriage for a week. For but one week!"

"My father was talking just now, with such smiles as I remember

to have seen of old, and have not seen for many and many a day, of the freedom that was to come to-morrow," said Madeline, with momentary firmness: "of the welcome change, the new scenes and objects that would bring fresh life to his exhausted frame. His face lightened at the thought. I will not defer it for an hour."

"These are but tricks and wiles to urge you on," cried Nicholas.

"I will hear no more," said Madeline, hurriedly, "I have heard too much—more than I should—already. What I have said to you, sir, I have said as to that dear friend to whom I trust in you honorably to repeat it."

She was hurrying past Nicholas, when he threw himself before her, and implored her to think, but once again, upon the fate to which she was hastening.

"There is no retreat," said Nicholas, in a very agony of supplication, "no withdrawing! What can I say that will induce you to pause at this last moment?"

"Nothing," she replied.

"If this were a plot," said Nicholas, "a plot, not yet laid bare by me, but which with time I might unravel; if you were (not knowing it) entitled to a fortune of your own, which, being recovered, would do all that this marriage can accomplish, would you not retract?"

"No, no, no! It is impossible; it is a child's tale. Time would bring his death. He is calling me!"

"It may be the last time we shall ever meet on earth," said Nicholas, "it may be better for me that we should never meet more."

"For both, for both," replied Madeline, not heeding what she said. "The time will come when to recall the memory of this one interview might drive me mad. Be sure to tell them, that you left me calm and happy. And God be with you, sir, and my grateful heart and blessing!"

She was gone. Nicholas staggering, from the house, thought of the hurried scene which had just closed upon him, as if it were the phantom of some wild, unquiet dream.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE PLOTTERS FAIL

EARLY in the forenoon of the day fixed for the wedding, Arthur Gride betook himself to Ralph Nickleby's, according to appointment. Producing from his hat a couple of large white favors, he pinned one on his breast, and with considerable difficulty induced his friend to do the like. Thus accoutered, they got into a hired coach which Ralph had in waiting, and drove to the residence of the fair and most wretched bride.

There was nobody to receive or welcome them when they arrived; and they stole up stairs into the usual sitting-room, more like two burglars than a bridegroom and his friend.

Presently a footstep was heard upon the stairs, and Bray himself came into the room on tiptoe.

"Hush!" he said, in a low voice. "She was very ill last night. She is dressed and crying bitterly in her own room; but she's better, and quite quiet. That's everything!"

"She is ready, is she?" said Ralph.

"Quite ready," replied the father. "I must go up stairs for a few minutes, to finish dressing. When I come down, I'll bring Madeline with me. Do you know I had a very strange dream last night, which I have not remembered till this instant? I dreamt that it was this morning, and you and I had been talking, as we have been this minute; that I went up stairs, for the very purpose for which I am going now; and that as I stretched out my hand to take Madeline's, and lead her down, the floor sank with me, and after falling from such an indescribable and tremendous height as the imagination could scarcely conceive except in dreams, I alighted in a grave."

"And you awoke and found that you were lying on your back, or suffering some pain from indigestion?" said Ralph. "Pshaw, Mr. Bray! Do as I do (you will have the opportunity, now that a constant round of pleasure and enjoyment opens upon you) and, occupying yourself a little more by day, have no time to think of what you dream by night."

Ralph followed him with a steady look, to the door; turning to the bridegroom, when they were again alone, he said:

"Mark my words, Gride, you won't have to pay *his* annuity very long. If he is not booked to make the long voyage before many months are past and gone, I wear an orange for a head!"

To this prophecy, so agreeable to his ears, Arthur returned no answer than a cackle of great delight. Ralph, throwing himself into a chair, they both sat waiting in profound silence, until Ralph's attentive ear caught the rustling of a woman's dress upon the stairs and the footstep of a man.

"Wake up!" he said, stamping his foot impatiently upon the floor, "and be something like life, man, will you? They are here. Urge those dry bones of yours this way."

Gride shambled forward, and stood, leering and bowing, close by Ralph's side, when the door opened and there entered in haste—not Bray and his daughter, but Nicholas and his sister Kate.

If some tremendous apparition from the world of shadows had suddenly presented itself before him, Ralph Nickleby could not have been more thunder-stricken than he was by this surprise.

"I might have guessed as much," he muttered. "Across my path at every turn, go where I will, do what I may, he comes!"

The absence of all color from the face; the dilated nostril; the quivering of the lips which, though set firmly against each other, would not be still; showed what emotions were struggling for the mastery with Nicholas. But he kept them down, and gently pressing Kate's arm to reassure her, stood erect and undaunted, front to front with his unworthy relative.

"Away!" was the first word Ralph could utter as he literally

gnashed his teeth. "Away! What brings you here? Liar, dastard, scoundrel, thief!"

"I come here," said Nicholas, in a low, deep voice, "to save your victim, if I can. Hard words will not move me, nor would hard blows. Here I stand, and will, till I have done my errand."

"Girl!" said Ralph, "retire! We can use force to him, but I would not hurt you if I could help it."

"I will not retire," cried Kate, with flashing eyes and the red blood mantling her cheeks. "You may use force with me; I think you will, for I *am* a girl, and that would well become you. But if I have a girl's weakness, I have a woman's heart, and it is not you who in a cause like this can turn that from its purpose."

"And what may your purpose be, most lofty lady?" said Ralph.

"To offer to the unhappy subject of your treachery, at this last moment," replied Nicholas, "a refuge and a home. If the near prospect of such a husband as you have provided, will not prevail upon her, I hope she may be moved by the prayers and entreaties of one of her own sex. I myself, avowing to her father by whom I am commissioned, will render it an act of greater baseness in him if he still dares to force this marriage on. Our purpose is not to see or speak with you; therefore to you, we stoop to say no more."

"You will remain, girl, will you?" said Ralph, "to be hauled down stairs, as I swear you shall if you stop here? No answer! Thank your brother for what follows. Gride, call down Bray—not his daughter. Let them keep her above."

"If you value your head," said Nicholas, taking up a position before the door, "stay where you are!"

Gride hesitated. Ralph, being by this time as furious as a baffled tiger, made for the door. At that moment, a heavy body fell with great violence on the floor above, and, in an instant afterwards, was heard a most appalling and terrific scream.

Scream followed scream; a heavy pattering of feet succeeded; many shrill voices clamoring together were heard to cry, "He is dead!"

“Stand off!” cried Nicholas; “if this is what I scarcely dare to hope it is, you are caught, villains, in your own toils.”

He burst from the room and darted up the stairs, forced his way through a crowd of persons who quite filled a small bedchamber; and found Bray lying on the floor quite dead; his daughter clinging to the body.

“How did this happen?” he cried, looking about him.

Several voices answered together, that he had been observed, through the half-opened door, reclining in a strange and uneasy position upon a chair; that he had been spoken to, several times, and not answering, was supposed to be asleep; until some person going in and shaking him by the arm, he fell heavily to the ground and was discovered to be dead.

“Who is the owner of this house?” asked Nicholas, hastily.

An elderly woman was pointed out to him and to her he said, as he knelt down and gently unwound Madeline’s arms from the lifeless mass round which they were entwined: “I represent this lady’s nearest friends, as her servant here knows, and must remove her from this dreadful scene. This is my sister to whose charge you confide her. My name and address are upon that card, and you shall receive from me all necessary directions for the arrangements that must be made. Stand aside, every one of you, and give room and air for God’s sake!”

Nicholas, taking the insensible girl in his arms, bore her from the chamber and down stairs into the room he had just quitted, followed by his sister and Madeline’s faithful servant, whom he charged to procure a coach directly while he and Kate bent over their beautiful charge and endeavored to restore her to animation. The girl performed her task so speedily, that in a very few minutes the coach was ready.

Ralph Nickleby and Gride, stunned by the awful event which had so suddenly overthrown their schemes, looked on these proceedings like men in a dream. It was not until every preparation was made for Madeline’s immediate removal that Ralph broke the silence by declaring she should not be taken away. “This man claims his wife, and he shall have her.”



Nicholas brings Madeline to his mother's cottage.— Page 96

"That man claims what is not his, and he should not have her, if he were fifty men, with fifty more to back him," said Nicholas.

"Who shall prevent him?"

"I will."

"By what right, I should like to know," said Ralph.

"By this right; that knowing what I do, you dare not tempt me further," said Nicholas, "and by this better right; that those I serve are her nearest and dearest friends. In their name I bear her hence. Stand from the door. Kate, do you go first. Lay not a hand on her, or on that woman, or on me, or so much as brush their garments as they pass you by!"

Arthur Gride happened to be in the doorway, and Nicholas swung him away, and then taking his beautiful burden in his arms rushed out. No one cared to stop him, and carrying Madeline, in his excitement, as easily as if she were an infant, he reached the coach in which Kate and the girl were already waiting, and, confiding his charge to them, jumped up beside the coachman and bade him drive to his mother's cottage.

The sudden shock she had received, combined with the great sorrow and anxiety of mind which she had so bravely endured, proved too much for Madeline's strength. Recovering from the state of stupefaction into which the sudden death of her father plunged her, she only exchanged that condition for one of dangerous and active illness.

Who, slowly recovering from a disorder so severe and dangerous, could be insensible to the unremitting attentions of such a nurse as gentle, tender, earnest Kate? What wonder that days became as years in knitting her and Madeline together! What wonder, if with every hour of returning health, there came some stronger and sweeter recognition of the praises which Kate, when they recalled old scenes—they seemed old now, and to have been acted years ago—would lavish on her brother! Where would have been the wonder, even if those praises had found a quick response in the breast of

Madeline, and if, with the image of Nicholas so constantly recurring in the features of his sister that she could scarcely separate the two, she had sometimes found it equally difficult to assign to each the feelings they had first inspired, and had imperceptibly mingled with her gratitude to Nicholas some of that warmer feeling which she had assigned to Kate!

The Cheeryble brothers, on their return, bestowed strong commendations on Nicholas for the part he had taken, and evinced great joy at the altered state of affairs, and the recovery of their young friend from trials so great and dangers so threatening.

At times when Nicholas came home at night, he would be accompanied by Mr. Frank Cheeryble, who was commissioned by the brothers to ask how Madeline was that night. On such occasions (and they were of very frequent occurrence), Mrs. Nickleby deemed it of particular importance that she should have her wits about her; for, from certain signs and tokens which had attracted her attention, she shrewdly suspected that Mr. Frank, interested as his uncles were in Madeline, came quite as much to see Kate as to inquire after her. One night she took the opportunity of being left alone with her son before retiring to rest, to sound him on the subject which so occupied her thought. To this end, she approached the question with divers laudatory and appropriate remarks, touching the general amiability of Mr. Frank Cheeryble.

"You are quite right, mother," said Nicholas, "quite right. He is a fine fellow."

Mrs. Nickleby then entered on a vast quantity of circumstantial evidence of a particularly incoherent and perplexing kind; the upshot of which was to establish beyond the possibility of a doubt, that Mr. Frank Cheeryble had fallen desperately in love with Kate.

"Dear mother," said Nicholas, "it surely can't be."

Nicholas had never, until that moment, bestowed a thought on the remote possibility of such an occurrence as that which was now communicated to him; for, besides that he had been much from home of late and closely occupied with other matters, his own jealous fears

had prompted the suspicion that some secret interest in Madeline, akin to that which he felt himself, occasioned those visits of Frank Cheeryble which had recently become so frequent.

"I am very much disturbed by what you tell me," said Nicholas, after a little reflection, "though I yet hope you may be mistaken."

"I don't understand why you should hope so," said Mrs. Nickleby. "You may depend upon it I do not share your hope."

She said this with such a mingling of high delight and self-congratulation, that it was inexpressibly painful to Nicholas to dash her hopes; but he felt that there was only one honorable course before him, and he was bound to take it.

"Dear mother," he said kindly, "don't you see that if there were really any serious inclination on the part of Mr. Frank towards Kate, and we suffered ourselves for a moment to encourage it, we should be acting a most dishonorable and ungrateful part? Remember how poor we are."

Mrs. Nickleby shook her head and said through her tears that poverty was not a crime.

"No," said Nicholas, "and for that reason poverty should engender an honest pride, that it may not lead and tempt us to unworthy actions. Think what we owe to these two brothers. What kind of a return would it be which would be comprised in our permitting their nephew, their only relative, whom they regard as a son, and for whom it would be mere childishness to suppose they have not formed plans suitably adapted to the education he has had and the fortune he will inherit—in our permitting him to marry a portionless girl, so closely connected with us, that the irresistible inference must be that it was a deliberate scheme, and a speculation amongst us three?"

Poor Mrs. Nickleby, crying more and more, murmured that of course Mr. Frank would ask the consent of his uncles first.

"Why to be sure, that would place *him* in a better situation with them," said Nicholas, "but we should still be open to the same suspicions. I have that confidence in Kate that I know she will feel as

I do—and in you, dear mother, to be assured that after a little consideration you will do the same.”

After many more representations and entreaties, Nicholas obtained a promise from Mrs. Nickleby that she would try all she could to think as he did; and that if Mr. Frank persevered in his attentions she would endeavor to discourage them. He determined to forbear mentioning the subject to Kate, until he was quite convinced that there existed a real necessity for his doing so; and he resolved to assure himself, as well as he could by close personal observation, of the exact position of affairs. This was a very wise resolution, but he was prevented from putting it in practise by a new source of anxiety and uneasiness.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ONE SCENE OF THIS HISTORY CLOSES



MIKE became alarmingly ill; so reduced and exhausted that he could scarcely move without assistance; so worn and emaciated, that it was painful to look upon him. Nicholas was warned by the same medical authority to whom he had at first appealed, that the last chance and hope of his life depended on his being instantly removed from London to the country. That part of Devonshire in which Nicholas had been himself bred, was named as the most favorable spot; but this advice was cautiously coupled with the information that whoever accompanied him thither must be prepared for the worst; for every token of rapid consumption had appeared, and he might never return alive.

The kind brothers, who were acquainted with the poor creature's sad history, despatched old Tim to be present at this consultation. That same morning, Nicholas was summoned by brother Charles into his private room, and thus addressed:

“My dear sir, no time must be lost. This lad shall not die, if such human means as we can use, can save his life; neither shall he die alone and in a strange place. Remove him to-morrow morning, see that he has every comfort that his situation requires, and don’t leave him; don’t leave him, my dear sir, until you know that there is no longer any immediate danger. It would be hard, indeed, to part you now. No, no, no! Tim shall wait upon you to-night, sir; Tim shall wait upon you to-night with a parting word or two. Brother Ned, my dear fellow, Mr. Nickleby waits to shake hands and say good-bye; Mr. Nickleby won’t be long gone; this poor chap will soon get better, very soon get better, and then he’ll find out some nice homely country people to leave him with, and will go backwards and forwards sometimes—backwards and forwards, you know, Ned. And there’s no cause to be down-hearted, for he’ll soon get better.”

What Tim Linkinwater said, or what he brought with him that night, needs not to be told. Next morning Nicholas and his feeble companion began their journey.

And who but one—and that one he who, but for those who crowded round him then, had never met a look of kindness, or known a word of pity—could tell what agony of mind, what blighted thoughts, what unavailing sorrow, were involved in that sad parting!

“See,” cried Nicholas eagerly, as he looked from the coach window, “they are at the corner of the lane still! And now there’s poor Kate whom you said you couldn’t bear to say good-bye to, waving her handkerchief. Don’t go without one gesture of farewell to Kate!”

“I can not make it!” cried his trembling companion, falling back in his seat and covering his eyes. “Do you see her now? Is she still there?”

“Yes, yes,” said Nicholas, earnestly. “There! She waves her hand again! I have answered for you—and now they are out of sight. Do not give way so bitterly, dear friend, don’t. You will meet them all again.”

He whom he thus encouraged, raised his withered hands and clasped them fervently together.

“In heaven. I humbly pray to God, in heaven!”

It sounded like the prayer of a broken heart.

Dividing the distance into two days' journey in order that his charge might sustain the less exhaustion and fatigue from travelling so far, Nicholas, at the end of the second day from their leaving home, found himself within a very few miles of the spot where the happiest years of his life had been passed, and which, while it filled his mind with pleasant and peaceful thoughts, brought back many painful and vivid recollections of the circumstances in which he and his had wandered forth from their old home, cast upon the rough world and the mercy of strangers.

It needed no such reflections as those which the memory of old days, and wanderings among scenes where our childhood has been passed, usually awaken in the most insensible minds, to soften the heart of Nicholas, and render him more than usually mindful of his drooping friend. By night and day, at all times and seasons; always watchful, attentive, and solicitous, and never varying in the discharge of his self-imposed duty to one so friendless and helpless as he whose sands of life were now fast running out and dwindling rapidly away: he was ever at his side. He never left him. To encourage and animate him, administer to his wants, support and cheer him to the utmost of his power, was now his constant and unceasing occupation.

They procured a humble lodging in a small farm-house, surrounded by beautiful, green meadows, where Nicholas, had often revelled when a child with a troop of merry school fellows; and here they took up their rest.

At first Smike was strong enough to walk about, for a short time with no other support or aid than that which Nicholas could afford him. At this time, nothing appeared to interest him so much as visiting those places which had been most familiar to his friend in bygone days. Yielding to this fancy, and pleased to find that its indulgence beguiled the sick boy of many tedious hours, and never failed to afford him matter for thought and conversation afterwards,

Nicholas made such spots the scenes of their daily rambles: driving him from place to place in a little pony-chaise, and supporting him on his arm while they walked slowly among these old haunts, or lingered in the sunlight to take long parting looks of those which were most quiet and beautiful.

It was on such occasions as these, that Nicholas, yielding almost unconsciously to the interest of old associations, would point out some tree that he had climbed a hundred times, to peep at the young birds in their nest; and the branch from which he used to shout to little Kate, who stood below terrified at the height he had gained, and yet urging him higher still by the intensity of her admiration. There was the old house, too, which they would pass every day, looking up at the tiny window through which the sun used to stream in and wake him on the summer mornings—they were all summer mornings then—and, climbing up the garden-wall and looking over, Nicholas could see the very rose-bush which had come, a present to Kate, from some little lover, and she had planted it with her own hands. There were the hedge rows where the brother and sister had often gathered the wild flowers together, and the green fields and shady paths where they had often strayed. There was not a lane, or brook, or copse, or cottage near, with which some childish event was not entwined, and back it came upon the mind—as events of childhood do—nothing in itself: perhaps a word, a laugh, a look, a passing thought or fear, some slight distress: and yet more strongly and distinctly marked, and better remembered, than the hardest trials or severest sorrows of a year ago.

One of these expeditions led them through the churchyard where was his father's grave. "Even here," said Nicholas, softly, "we use to loiter before we knew what death was. We little thought then whose ashes would rest beneath; and, wondering at the silence, sat down to rest and speak below our breath. Once Kate was lost, and after a hour of fruitless search, they found her fast asleep under that tree which shades my father's grave. He was very fond of her, and said when he took her up in his arms, still sleeping, that whenever he



died he would wish to be buried where his dear little child had laid her head. You see his wish was not forgotten."

Nothing more passed, at the time; but that night, as Nicholas sat beside his bed, Smike started from what had seemed to be a slumber, and laying his hand in his, prayed, as the tears coursed down his face, that he would make him one solemn promise.

"What is that?" said Nicholas, kindly. "If I can redeem it, or hope to do so, you know I will."

"I am sure you will," was the reply. "Promise me that when I die, I shall be buried near—as near as they can make my grave—to the tree we saw to-day."

Nicholas gave the promise; he had few words to give it in, but they were solemn and earnest. His poor friend kept his hand in his, and turned as if to sleep. But there were stifled sobs; and the hand was pressed more than once, or twice, or thrice, before he sank to rest and slowly loosed his hold.

In a fortnight's time he became too ill to move about. Once or twice, Nicholas drove him out, propped up with pillows; but the motion of the pony-chaise was painful to him, and brought on fits of fainting, which, in his weakened state, were dangerous. There was an old couch in the house, which was his favorite resting-place by day; when the sun shone, and the weather was warm, Nicholas had this wheeled into the orchard which was close at hand, and his charge being well wrapped up and carried out to it, they used to sit there sometimes for hours together.

And now Nicholas began to see that hope was gone, and that, upon the partner of his poverty, and the sharer of his better fortune, the world was closing fast. There was little pain, little uneasiness, but there was no rallying, no effort, no struggle for life. He was worn and wasted to the last degree; his voice had sunk so low that he could scarce be heard to speak; Nature was thoroughly exhausted, and he had lain him down to die.

On a fine, mild, autumn day, when all was tranquil and at peace, when the soft air crept in at the window of the quiet room, and not

a sound was heard but the gentle rustling of the leaves, Nicholas sat in his old place by the bedside, and knew that the time was nearly come. So very still it was, that, every now and then, he bent down his ear to listen for the breathing of him who lay asleep, as if to assure himself that life was still there, and that he had not fallen into that deep slumber from which on earth there is no waking.

While he was thus employed, the closed eyes opened, and on the pale face there came a placid smile.

"That's well," said Nicholas, "the sleep has done you good."

"I have had such a pleasant dreams," was the answer. "Such pleasant, happy dreams!"

"Of what?" asked Nicholas.

The dying boy turned towards him, and, putting his arm about his neck, made answer, "I shall soon be there!"

After a short silence he spoke again.

"I am not afraid to die," he said, "I am quite contented. I almost think that if I could rise from this bed quite well again, I would not wish to do so now. You have often told me we shall meet again—so very often lately, and now I feel the truth of that, so strongly—that I can even bear to part from you."

The trembling voice and tearful eye, and the closer grasp of the arm which accompanied these latter words, showed how they filled the speaker's heart; nor were there wanting indications of how deeply they had touched the heart of him to whom they were addressed.

"You say well," returned Nicholas, at length, "and comfort me very much, dear fellow. Let me hear you say you are happy, if you can."

"I must tell you something first. I should not have a secret from you. You will not blame me, at a time like this, I know."

"I blame you!" exclaimed Nicholas.

"I am sure you will not. You asked me why I was so changed, and—and sat so much alone. Shall I tell you why?"

"Not if it pains you," said Nicholas. "I only asked that I might make you happier, if I could."

"I know. I felt that, at the time." He drew his friend closer to him. "You will forgive me; I could not help it; but though I would have died to make her happy, it broke my heart to see—I know he loves her dearly—Oh! who could find that out, so soon as I?"

The words which followed were feebly and faintly uttered, and broken by long pauses; but from them Nicholas learned for the first time, that the dying boy, with all the ardor of a nature concentrated on one absorbing, hopeless, secret passion, loved his sister Kate.

He had procured a lock of her hair, which hung at his breast, folded in one or two slight ribbons she had worn. He prayed that, when he was dead, Nicholas would take it off, so that no eyes but his might see it, and that when he was laid in his coffin and about to be placed in the earth, he would hang it round his neck again, that it might rest with him in the grave.

Upon his knees Nicholas gave him this pledge, and promised once more that he should rest in the spot he had pointed out. They then embraced and kissed each other on the cheek.

"Now," he murmured, "I am happy."

He fell into a light slumber, and waking smiled as before; then, spoke of the beautiful gardens, which he said stretched out before him, and were filled with figures of men, women, and many children, all with light upon their faces; then whispered that it was Eden—and so died.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SMIKE'S PARENTAGE IS BROUGHT TO LIGHT

 ALPH NICKLEBY sat alone, in the solitary room where he was accustomed to take his meals, and to sit of nights when no profitable occupation called him abroad. "What is this," he said, "that hangs over me, and I can not shake off? I have never pampered myself, and should not be ill. I have never moped, and pined, and yielded to fancies; but what *can* a man do without rest?"

He pressed his hand upon his forehead, as he spoke, and went on:

"Night after night comes and goes, and I have no rest. If I sleep, what rest is that which is disturbed by constant dreams of the same detested faces crowding round me—of the same detested people, in every variety of action, mingling with all I say and do, and always to my defeat? Waking, what rest have I, constantly haunted by this heavy shadow of—I know not what—which is its worst character. I must have rest. One night's unbroken rest, and I should be a man again."

It was nearly ten o'clock when he heard a knocking at the door, but still sat quiet as before, as if he could not even bring his thoughts to bear upon that. It had been often repeated, and he had several times heard a voice outside, saying there was a light in the window (meaning, as he knew, his own candle), before he could rouse himself and go down stairs.

"Mr Nickleby, there is terrible news for you, and I am sent to beg you will come with me directly," said a voice he seemed to recognize. He held his hand above his eyes, and looking out, saw Tim Linkinwater on the steps.

"Come where?" demanded Ralph.

"To our house. I have a coach here."

"Why should I come there?" said Ralph.

"Don't ask me why, but pray come with me."

Ralph looked at him more closely. Seeing that he was indeed, greatly excited, he faltered, and could not tell what to say or think.

"You had better hear this now than at any other time," said Tim, "it may have some influence with you. For Heaven's sake, come."

Perhaps, at another time, Ralph's obstinacy and dislike would have been proof against any appeal from such a quarter, however emphatically urged; but now, after a moment's hesitation, he went into the hall for his hat, and returning, got into the coach without speaking a word.

Tim well remembered afterwards, and often said, that as Ralph Nickleby went into the house for the purpose, he saw him, by the light of the candle which he had set down upon a chair, reel and stagger like a drunken man. He well remembered, too, that when he had placed his foot upon the coach steps, he turned round and looked upon him with a face so ashy pale and so very wild and vacant that it made him shudder, and for the moment almost afraid to follow. People were fond of saying that he had some dark presentiment upon him then.

A profound silence was observed during the ride. Arrived at their place of destination, Ralph followed his conductor into the house, and into a room where the two brothers were. He was so astounded not to say awed, by something of a mute compassion for himself which was visible in their manner and that of the old clerk, that he could scarcely speak.

Having taken a seat, however, he contrived to say, though in broken words, "What—what have you to say to me?"

The room was old and large, very imperfectly lighted, and terminated in a bay window, about which hung some heavy drapery. Casting his eyes in this direction, as he spoke, he thought he made out the dusky figure of a man. He was confirmed in this impression by seeing that the object moved, as if uneasy under his scrutiny.

"Who's that yonder?" he said.

"One who has conveyed to us, within these two hours, the intelligence which caused our sending for you," replied brother Charles. "Let him be, sir, for the present."

"Riddles!" said Ralph, faintly. "Well, sir?"

The brothers conferred apart for a short time; their manner showed that they were agitated. Ralph glanced at them, twice or thrice, and ultimately said, with a great effort to recover his self-possession, "Now, what is this? If I am brought from home at this time of night, let it be for something. What have you to tell me?" After a short pause he added, "Is my niece dead?"

He had struck upon a key which made the task of commencement an easier one. Brother Charles turned, and said it was a death of which they had to tell him, but his niece was well.

"You don't mean to tell me," said Ralph, as his eyes brightened, "that her brother's dead! No, that is too good. I'd not believe it if you told me so. It would be too welcome news to be true."

"Shame on you, hardened and unnatural man!" cried the other brother, warmly; "prepare yourself for intelligence, which, if you have any human feeling in your breast, will make even you shrink and tremble. What if we tell you that a poor, unfortunate boy, a child in everything but never having known one of those tender endearments, or one of those lightsome hours which make our childhood a time to be remembered like a happy dream through all our after life: a warm-hearted, harmless, affectionate creature, who never offended you, or did you wrong, but on whom you have vented the malice and hatred you have conceived for your nephew, and whom you have made an instrument for wreaking your bad passions upon him: what if I tell you that, sinking under your persecution, sir, and the misery and ill-usage of a life short in years but long in suffering, this poor creature has gone to tell his sad tale where, for your part in it you must surely answer."

"If you tell me that he is dead," said Ralph; "if you tell me that he is dead, I forgive you all else. If you tell me that he is dead, I am in

your debt and bound to you for life. He is! I see it in your faces! Who triumphs now? Is this your dreadful news; this your terrible intelligence? You see how it moves me. You did well to send. I would have travelled a hundred miles on foot, through mud, mire, and darkness, to hear this news just at this time."

Even then, moved as he was by this savage joy, Ralph could see in the faces of the two brothers, mingling with their look of disgust and horror, something of that indefinable compassion for himself which he had noticed before.

"And *he* brought you the intelligence, did he?" said Ralph, pointing with his finger towards the recess already mentioned; "and sat there, no doubt, to see me prostrated and overwhelmed by it! Ha, ha, ha! But I tell him that I'll be a sharp thorn in his side for many a long day to come; and I tell you two, again, that you don't know him yet; and that you'll rue the day you took compassion on the vagabond."

"You take me for your nephew," said a hollow voice; "it would be better for you and for me, too, if I were he indeed."

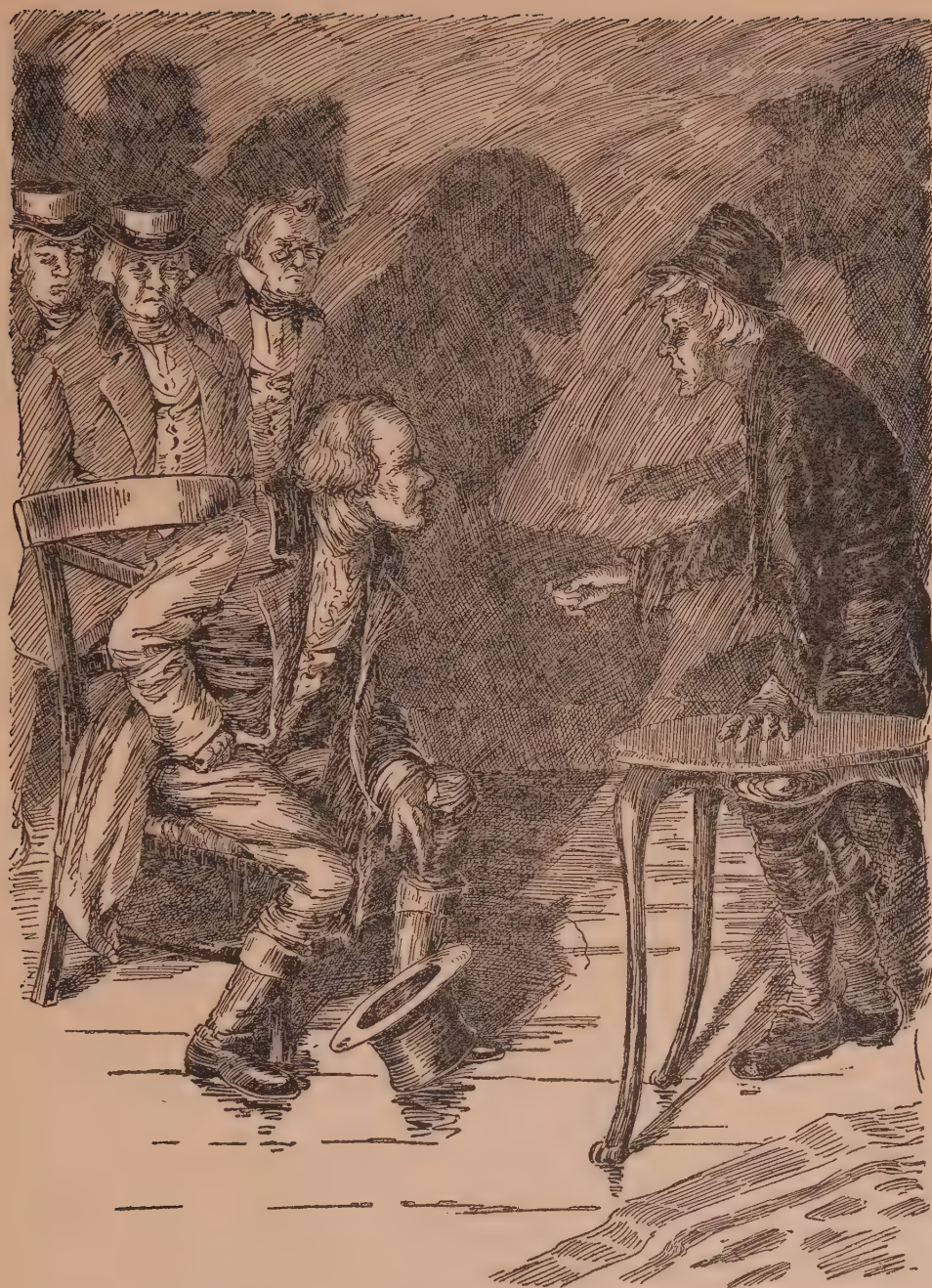
The figure that he had seen so dimly, rose, and came slowly down. He started back, for he found that he confronted—not Nicholas, as he had supposed, but Brooker.

Ralph had no reason, that he knew, to fear this man; he had never feared him before; but the pallor which had been observed in his face when he issued forth that night, came upon him again. He was seen to tremble, and his voice changed as he said, keeping his eyes upon him:

"What does this fellow here? Do you know he is a convict, a felon, a common thief?"

"Hear what he has to tell you. Oh, Mr. Nickleby, hear what he has to tell you, be he what he may!" cried the brothers, with such emphatic earnestness that Ralph turned to them in wonder. They pointed to Brooker. Ralph gazed at him, as it seemed mechanically.

"That boy," said the man, "that these gentlemen have been talking of——"



Brooker tells Ralph of Smike's parentage.—Page 112

"That boy," repeated Ralph, looking vacantly at him.

"Whom I saw stretched dead and cold upon his bed, and who is now in his grave——"

"Who is now in his grave," echoed Ralph, like one who talks in his sleep.

The man raised his eyes and clasped his hands solemnly.

"——Was your only son, so help me God in Heaven!"

In the midst of a dead silence, Ralph sat down, pressing his two hands upon his temples. He removed them, after a minute, and never was there seen, part of a living man undisfigured by any wound, such a ghastly face as he then disclosed. He looked at Brooker, who was by this time standing at a short distance from him; but did not say one word, or make the slightest sound or gesture.

"Gentlemen," said the man, "I offer no excuses for myself. I am long past that. If, in telling you how this has happened, I tell you that I was harshly used and perhaps driven out of my real nature, I do it, only as a necessary part of my story, and not to shield myself. I am a guilty man."

He stopped, as if to recollect, and looking away from Ralph, and addressing himself to the brothers, proceeded in a subdued and humble tone:

"Among those who once had dealings with this man, gentlemen—that's from twenty to twenty-five years ago—there was one: a rough, fox-hunting, hard-drinking gentleman, who had run through his own fortune, and wanted to squander away that of his sister; they were both orphans, and she lived with him and managed his house. I do not know whether it was originally to back his influence and try to over-persuade the young woman or not, but he," (pointing to Ralph) "used to go down to the house in Leicestershire pretty often, and stop there many days at a time. They had had a great many dealings together, and he may have gone on some of those, or to patch up his client's affairs, which were in a ruinous state; but, of course, he went for profit. The gentlewoman was not a girl, but she was, I have heard say, handsome and entitled to a pretty large property.

In course of time he married her. The same love of gain which led him to contract this marriage, led to its being kept secret; for a clause in her father's will declared that if she married without her brother's consent, the property, in which she had only some life interest while she remained single, should pass away altogether to another branch of the family. The brother would give no consent that the sister did not buy, and pay for handsomely. Mr. Nickleby would consent to no such sacrifice; and so they went on, keeping their marriage secret, and waiting for the brother to break his neck or die of a fever. He did neither, and meanwhile the result of this private marriage was a son. The child was put out to nurse, a long way off; his mother never saw him but once or twice, and then by stealth, and his father—so eagerly did he thirst after the money which seemed to come almost within his grasp now, for his brother-in-law was very ill, and breaking more and more every day—never went near him, to avoid raising suspicion. The brother lingered on; Mr. Nickleby's wife constantly urged him to avow their marriage; he peremptorily refused. She remained alone in a dull country house, seeing little or no company but riotous, drunken sportsmen. He lived in London and clung to his business. Angry quarrels and recriminations took place and when they had been married nearly seven years, and were within a few weeks of the time when the brother's death would have adjusted all, she eloped with a younger man, and left him."

Here he paused, but Ralph did not stir, and the brothers signed to him to proceed.

"It was then that I became acquainted with these circumstances from his own lips. They were no secrets then; for the brother and others knew them; but they were communicated to me, not on this account, but because I was wanted. He followed the fugitives. Some said, to make money of his wife's shame; but, I believe, to take some violent revenge, for that was as much his character as the other; perhaps more. He did not find them, and she died not long after. I don't know whether he began to think he might like the child, or whether he wished to make sure that it should never fall

into its mother's hands; but before he went, he entrusted me with the charge of bringing it home, and I did so."

He went on from this point, in a still more humble tone, and spoke in a very low voice, pointing to Ralph as he resumed.

"He had used me ill—cruelly—and I hated him. I brought the child home to his own house and lodged him in the front garret. Neglect had made him sickly, and I was obliged to call in a doctor, who said he must be removed for change of air, or he would die. I think that first put it in my head. I did it then. He was gone six weeks, and when he came back, I told him—with every circumstance well planned and proved; nobody could have suspected me—that the boy was dead and buried. He might have been disappointed in some intention he had formed, or he might have had some natural affection, but he *was* grieved at *that*, and I was confirmed in my design of opening up the secret one day, and making it a means of getting money from him. I had heard, like most other men, of Yorkshire schools. I took the child to one kept by a man named Squeers, and left it there. I gave him the name of Smike. Year by year, I paid twenty pounds a year for him for six years, never breathing the secret all the time; for I had left his father's service after more hard usage, and had quarrelled with him again. I was sent away from this country. I have been away nearly eight years. As soon as I came home again, I travelled down into Yorkshire, and, skulking in the village of an evening time, made inquiries about the boys at the school, and found that the one whom I had placed there had run away with a young man bearing the name of his own father. I sought his father out in London, and hinting at what I could tell him, tried for a little money to support life: but he repulsed me with threats. I then found out his clerk, and, going on from little to little, and showing him that there were good reasons for communicating with me, learned what was going on; and it was I who told him that the boy was no son of the man who claimed to be his father. All this time I had never seen the boy. At length, I heard from this same source that he was very ill, and where he was. I travelled down there and saw him.

"This is my story. I demand to be brought face to face with the schoolmaster, and put to any possible proof of any part of it, and I will show that it's too true, and that I have this guilt upon my soul."

He had hardly spoken, when the lamp which stood upon the table close to where Ralph was seated, and which was the only one in the room, was thrown to the ground, and left them in darkness. There was some trifling confusion in obtaining another light, the interval was a mere nothing; but when the light appeared, Ralph Nickleby was gone.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RALPH MAKES ONE LAST APPOINTMENT—AND KEEPS IT

N the next morning after Brooker's disclosure had been made, Nicholas returned home. The meeting between him and those whom he had left there, was not without strong emotion on both sides; for they had been informed by his letters of what had occurred, and, besides that his griefs were theirs, they mourned with him the death of one whose forlorn and helpless state had first established a claim upon their compassion, and whose truth of heart and grateful, earnest nature had, every day, endeared him to them more and more.

Waiting till they were all tolerably quiet and composed again, Nicholas, who stood in need of some rest after his long journey, retired to his own room, and throwing himself, dressed as he was, upon the bed, fell into a sound sleep. When he awoke, he found Kate sitting by his bedside, who, seeing that he had opened his eyes, stooped down to kiss him.

"I came to tell you how glad I am to see you home again."

"But I can't tell you how glad I am to see you, Kate."

"We have been wearying so for your return," said Kate, "mamma and I, and—and Madeline."

"You said in your last letter that she was quite well," said Nicholas, rather hastily, and coloring as he spoke. "Has nothing been said, since I went away, about any future arrangements that the brothers have in contemplation for her?"

"No, not a word," replied Kate. "I can't think of parting from her without sorrow; and, surely, Nicholas, *you* don't wish it."

Nicholas colored again, and sitting down beside his sister on a little couch near the window, said:

"No, Kate, no, I do not. I might strive to disguise my real feelings from anybody but you; but I will tell you that—briefly and plainly, Kate—that I love her."

Kate's eyes brightened, and she was going to make some reply, when Nicholas laid his hand upon her arm, and went on:

"Nobody must know this but you. She last of all."

"Dear Nicholas!"

"No, Kate! Since I have been absent, I have had, in that poor fellow who is gone, perpetually before my eyes, another instance of the munificent liberality of these noble brothers. As far as in me lies, I will deserve it, and if I have wavered in my bounden duty to them before, I am now determined to discharge it rigidly, and to put further delays and temptations beyond my reach."

"Before you say another word, dear Nicholas," said Kate, turning pale, "you must hear what I have to tell you. I came on purpose, but I had not the courage. What you say now gives me new heart." She faltered and burst into tears.

There was that in her manner which prepared Nicholas for what was coming. Kate tried to speak, but her tears prevented her.

"Come, you foolish girl," said Nicholas; "why Kate, Kate, be a woman! I think I know what you would tell me. It concerns Mr. Frank, does it not?"

Kate sunk her head upon his shoulder, and sobbed out "Yes."

"And he has offered you his hand, perhaps, since I have been away,

is that it?" said Nicholas. "Yes? Well, well, it's not so difficult, you see, to tell me after all. He offered you his hand?"

"Which I refused," said Kate.

"Yes; and why?"

"I told him," she said, in a trembling voice, "that it was a pang and a great trial, I did so, firmly, and begged him not to see me any more."

"That's my own brave Kate!" said Nicholas, pressing her to his breast. "I knew you would, and did you suppose, Kate, when you made this sacrifice to what you knew was right and honorable, that I should shrink from mine?"

"Oh, no! not if your position had been the same, but——"

"But it is the same," interrupted Nicholas; "Madeline is not the near relation of our benefactors, but she is closely bound to them by ties as dear. I was first entrusted with her history, specially because they reposed unbounded confidence in me, and believed that I was as true as steel. How base would it be of me to take advantage of the circumstances which placed her here, or of the slight service I was happily able to render her, and to seek to engage her affections when the result must be, if I succeeded, that the brothers would be disappointed in their darling wish of establishing her as their own child. I doubt whether I have not done wrong, even now; and to-day I will without reserve or equivocation, disclose my real reasons to Mr. Cheeryble, and implore him to take immediate measures for removing this young lady to the shelter of some other roof."

"What man," thought Nicholas proudly, while on his way, soon afterward, to the brothers' house, "would not be sufficiently rewarded for any sacrifice of fortune, by the possession of such a heart as Kate's which, but that hearts weigh light, and gold and silver heavy, is beyond all praise! Frank has money and wants no more. Where would it buy him such a treasure as Kate?"

"Ah, Mr. Nickleby!" cried Tim Linkinwater, as Nicholas presented himself before him, "God bless you! How d'ye do? Well? Say you are quite well and never better. Do now."

"Quite," said Nicholas, shaking him by both hands.

"Ah!" said Tim, "you look tired though, now I come to look at you. I didn't mean to ask you, but I should like to hear a few particulars about that poor boy. Did he mention Cheeryble Brothers at all?"

"Yes," said Nicholas, "many and many a time."

"That was right of him," returned Tim, wiping his eyes; "that was right of him."

"And he mentioned your name a score of times," said Nicholas, "and often bade me carry back his love to Mr. Linkinwater."

"No, did he though?" rejoined Tim, sobbing outright. "Poor fellow! I wish we could have had him buried in town. There isn't such a burying-ground in all London as that little one on the other side of the square—there are counting-houses all around it, and if you go in there, on a fine day, you can see the books and safes through the open windows. And he sent his love to me, did he? I didn't expect he would have thought of me."

Nicholas went quickly to brother Charles' room. If he had previously sustained his firmness and fortitude, it had been by an effort which had cost him no little pain; but the warm welcome, the hearty manner, the homely, unaffected commiseration of the good old man, went to his heart, and no inward struggle could prevent his showing his grief.

"Come, come, my dear sir," said the benevolent merchant; "we must not be cast down; no, no. Where is my brother Ned, Tim Linkinwater, where, sir, is my brother Ned?"

"Gone out with Mr. Trimmers, about getting that unfortunate man into the hospital, and sending a nurse to his children," said Tim.

"My brother Ned is a great fellow, a fine fellow!" exclaimed brother Charles as he shut the door and returned to Nicholas. "He will be overjoyed to see you, my dear sir. We have been speaking of you every day."

"To tell you the truth, sir, I am glad to find you alone," said Nich-

olas with some natural hesitation; "for I am anxious to say something to you. Can you spare me a few minutes?"

"Surely, surely," returned brother Charles, looking at him with an anxious countenance. "Say on, my dear sir, say on."

"I scarcely know how or where to begin," said Nicholas. "If ever one mortal had reason to be penetrated with love and reverence for another, those are the feelings which I should entertain for you, and do, believe me!"

"I do believe you; I have never doubted it."

"Your telling me that so kindly," said Nicholas, emboldens me to proceed. I find that constant association and companionship with Madeline Bray is fatal to my peace of mind, and may prove destructive to the resolutions I made in the beginning and up to this time have faithfully kept. In short, sir, I can not trust myself, and I implore and beseech you to remove this young lady from under the charge of my mother and sister without delay. I know that to any one but myself—to you, who consider the immeasurable distance between me and this young lady, who is now your ward, and the object of your peculiar care—my loving her, even in thought, must appear the height of rashness and presumption. I know it is. But, who can see her, as I have seen her, who can know what her life has been, and not love her? I have no excuse but that; and as I can not fly from this temptation, and can not repress this passion with its object constantly before me, what can I do but pray you to remove it, and to leave me to forget her!"

"Mr. Nickleby," said the old man, after a short silence, "you can do no more. I was wrong to expose a young man like you, to this trial. I might have foreseen what would happen. Thank you, sir, thank you. Madeline shall be removed."

"If you would grant me one favor, dear sir, and suffer her to ever remember me with esteem, by never revealing to her this confession I have made—"

"I will take care," said Mr. Cheeryble. "And now, is this all you have to tell me?"

"No," replied Nicholas, meeting his eye, "it is not."

"I know the rest," said Mr. Cheeryble, apparently very much relieved by this prompt reply. "When did it come to your knowledge, Mr. Nickleby?"

"When I reached home this morning."

"You felt it your duty immediately to come to me, and tell me what your sister no doubt acquainted you with?"

"I did," said Nicholas, "though I could have wished to have spoken to Mr. Frank first."

"Frank was with me last night," replied the old gentleman. "You have done well, Mr. Nickleby—very well, sir—and I thank you once more. Frank is a heedless, foolish fellow. I will take care that this is brought to a close without delay. Let us say no more upon the subject; it is a painful one to me. Come to me in half an hour. I have strange things to tell you, my dear sir, and your uncle has made an appointment for you to wait upon him with me this afternoon."

"Wait upon him! With you, sir!" cried Nicholas.

"Ay, with me," replied the old gentleman. "Return to me in half an hour, and I'll tell you more."

Nicholas waited upon him at the time mentioned, and then he learned all that had taken place on the previous day, and all that was known of the appointment Ralph had made with the brothers; which was for that night, and for the better understanding of which it will be necessary to return and follow Ralph's footsteps from the house of the twin brothers.

Creeping from the house, and slinking off like a thief; groping with his hands when first he got into the street, as if he were a blind man; and looking often over his shoulder while he hurried away, as though he were followed in imagination or reality by some one anxious to question or detain him; Ralph Nickleby left the city behind him, and took the road to his own home.

The night was dark, and a cold wind blew, driving the clouds fast and furiously before it. There was one black gloomy mass that

seemed to follow him: not hurrying in the wild chase with the others, but lingering sullenly behind, and gliding darkly and stealthily on. He often looked back at this, and, more than once, stopped to let it pass over; but, somehow, when he went forward again, it was still behind him, coming mournfully and slowly up, like a shadowy funeral train. But as he drew nearer and nearer home he forgot it, and began to think how very dull and solitary the house would be inside.

This feeling became so strong at last, that when he reached his own door, he could hardly make up his mind to turn the key and open it. When he had done that, and gone into the passage, he felt as though to shut it again would be to shut out the world. But he let it go, and it closed with a loud noise. There was no light. How very dreary, cold, and still it was!

Shivering from head to foot he made his way up stairs into the room where he had been last disturbed. He made a kind of compact with himself that he would not think of what had happened, until he got home. He was at home now, and suffered himself to consider it.

His own child, his own child! He never doubted the tale; he felt it was true; knew it as well, now, as if he had been privy to it all along. His own child! And dead, too! Dying beside Nicholas, loving him, and looking upon him as something like an angel! That was the worst.

The dead boy's love for Nicholas, and the devotion of Nicholas to him, was insupportable agony. The picture of his deathbed, with Nicholas at his side, tending and supporting him, and he breathing out his thanks and expiring in his arms, when he would have had them mortal enemies and hating each other to the last, drove him frantic. He groped his way out of the room, and up the echoing stairs—up to the top—to the front garret—where he closed the door behind him, and remained.

It was a mere lumber room now, but it yet contained an old, dismantled bedstead; the one on which his son had slept; for no other had ever been there. He avoided it hastily, and sat down as far from it as he could.

The weakened glare of the lights in the street below, shining in at the window which had no blind or curtain to intercept it, was enough to show the character of the room, though not sufficient fully to reveal the various articles of lumber, old corded trunks and broken furniture, which were scattered about. It had a shelving roof; high in one part, and at the other descending almost to the floor. It was towards the highest part that Ralph directed his eyes; and upon it he kept them fixed steadily for some minutes. Then he rose, and dragging thither an old chest upon which he had been seated, mounted on it, and felt along the wall above his head with both hands. At length they touched a large iron hook, firmly driven into one of the beams.

At that moment he was interrupted by a loud knocking at the door below. After a little hesitation he opened the window and demanded who it was.

"I want Mr. Nickleby," replied a voice.

"What with him?"

"That's not Mr. Nickleby's voice, surely?" was the reply.

It was not like it; but it was Ralph who spoke, and so he said.

The voice made answer that the twin brothers wished to know whether the man whom he had seen that night was to be detained; and that, although it was now midnight, they had sent, in their anxiety to do right.

"Yes," cried Ralph, "detain him till to-morrow; then let them bring him here—him and my nephew—and come themselves, and be sure that I will be ready to receive them."

"At what hour?" asked the voice.

"At any hour," replied Ralph fiercely. "In the afternoon, tell them. At any hour, at any minute. All times will be alike to me."

He listened to the man's retreating footsteps, until the sound had passed, and then, gazing up at the sky, saw, or thought he saw, the same black cloud that had seemed to follow him home, and which now appeared to hover directly above the house.

"I know its meaning now," he muttered, "and the restless nights,



Ralph Nickleby in Smike's old garret — Page 121

the dreams, and why I have quailed of late. All pointed to this. Oh! if men by selling their own souls could ride rampant for a term, for how short a term would I barter mine to-night!"

With a wild look around, in which frenzy, hatred, and despair were horribly mingled, he shook his clenched hand at the sky above him, which was still dark and threatening, and closed the window.

The rain and hail pattered against the glass; the chimneys quaked and rocked; the crazy casement rattled with the wind, as though an impatient hand inside were striving to burst it open. But no hand was there, and it opened no more.

* * * * *

"How is this?" cried one. "The gentlemen say they can't make anybody hear, and have been trying these two hours."

"And yet he came home last night," said another, "for he spoke to somebody out of the window upstairs."

They were a little knot of men, and, the window being mentioned, went out in the road to look up at it. This occasioned their observing that the house was still close shut, as the housekeeper had said she had left it on the previous night, and led to a great many suggestions, which terminated in two or three of the boldest getting round to the back and so entering by a window, while the others remained outside, in impatient expectation.

They looked into all the rooms below; opening the shutters as they went, to admit the fading light, and still finding nobody, and everything quiet and in its place, doubted whether they should go further. One man, however, remarking that they had not yet been into the garret, and that it was there he had last been seen, they all agreed to look there too, and went softly up, for the mystery and silence made them timid.

After they had stood for an instant on the landing, eyeing each other, he who had proposed their carrying the search so far, turned the handle of the door, and, pushing it open, looked through the chink, and fell back directly.

"It's very odd," he whispered, "he's hiding behind the door! Look!"

They pressed forward to see; but one among them thrusting the others aside with a loud exclamation, drew a clasp knife from his pocket and dashing into the room cut down the body.

Ralph Nickleby had torn a rope from one of the old trunks, and hanged himself on an iron hook immediately below the trap door in the ceiling—in the very place to which the eyes of his son, a lonely, desolate little creature, had so often been directed in childish terror, fourteen years before.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE BROTHERS CHEERYBLE MAKE VARIOUS DECLARATIONS
FOR THEMSELVES AND OTHERS

OME weeks had passed, and the first shock of these events had subsided. Madeline had been removed; Frank had been absent; Nicholas and Kate had begun to try in good earnest to stifle their own regrets, and to live for each other and for their mother—who, poor lady, could in no wise be reconciled to this dull and altered state of affairs—when there came one evening, by favor of Mr. Linkinwater, an invitation from the Brothers, to dinner on the next day but one: comprehending not only Mrs. Nickleby, Kate, and Nicholas, but little Miss La Creevy, who was most particularly mentioned.

"Now, my dears," said Mrs. Nickleby, when they had rendered becoming honor to the bidding, and Tim had taken his departure, "What does this mean?"

"What do *you* mean, mother?" asked Nicholas.

"I say, my dear," rejoined that lady, with a face of unfathomable mystery, "what does this invitation to dinner mean?"

"I conclude it means, that on such a day, we are to eat and drink in their house, and that its intent and object is to confer pleasure upon us," said Nicholas.

"And that's all you conclude it is, my dear?"

"I have not yet arrived at anything deeper, mother."

"Then I'll just tell you one thing," said Mrs. Nickleby, "you'll find yourself a little surprised; that's all. You may depend upon it this means something besides dinner."

"Tea and supper, perhaps," suggested Nicholas.

"I wouldn't be absurd, my dear, if I were you," replied Mrs. Nickleby, in a lofty manner, "because it's not by any means becoming, and doesn't suit you at all. What I mean to say is, that the Cheeryble brothers don't ask us to dinner with all this ceremony, for nothing. Never mind; wait and see. You won't believe anything *I* say, of course. It's much better to wait; a great deal better; it's satisfactory to all parties, and there can be no disputing. All I say is, remember what I say now, and when I say I said so, don't say I didn't."

With this stipulation, Mrs. Nickleby, who was troubled night and day, with a vision of a hot messenger tearing up to the door to announce that Nicholas had been taken into partnership, quitted that branch of the subject, and entered upon a new one.

"It's a very extraordinary thing," she said, "a most extraordinary thing that they should have invited Miss La Creevy. It quite astonishes me, upon my word, it does. Of course it is very pleasant that she should be invited, very pleasant, and I have no doubt that she'll conduct herself extremely well; she always does. It's very gratifying to think we should have been the means of introducing her into such society, and I'm quite glad of it—quite rejoiced—for she certainly is an exceedingly well-behaved and good-natured little person. I could wish that some friend would mention to her how very badly she has her cap trimmed, and what very preposterous bows those are, but of course that's impossible, and if she likes to make a fright of herself, no doubt she has a perfect right to do so.

We never see ourselves—never do, and never did—and I suppose we never shall.”

This moral reflection reminding her of the necessity of being peculiarly smart on the occasion, so as to counterbalance Miss La Creevy and be herself an effectual set-off and atonement, led Mrs. Nickleby into a consultation with her daughter relative to certain ribbons, gloves, and trimmings: which, being a complicated question, and one of paramount importance, soon routed the previous one, and put it to flight.

The great day arriving, the good lady put herself under Kate's hands an hour or so after breakfast, and, dressing by easy stages, completed her toilet in sufficient time to allow of her daughter's making hers, which was very simple and not very long, though so satisfactory that she had never appeared more charming or looked more lovely. Miss La Creevy, too, arrived with two bandboxes (whereof the bottoms fell out, as they were being handed from the coach) and something in a newspaper, which a gentleman had sat upon, coming down, and which was obliged to be ironed again, before it was fit for service. At last everybody was dressed, including Nicholas who had come home to fetch them, and they went away in a coach sent by the Brothers for the purpose: Mrs. Nickleby wondering very much as to the extent of his discoveries in the morning; whether he had smelt anything cooking, at all like turtle, and if not, what he had smelt; and diversifying the conversation with reminiscences of dinners to which she had gone some twenty years ago, concerning which she particularized, not only the dishes but the guests, in whom her hearers did not feel a very absorbing interest, as not one of them had ever chanced to hear their names before.

The old butler received them with profound respect and many smiles, and ushered them into the drawing-room, where they were received by the Brothers with so much cordiality and kindness that Mrs. Nickleby was quite in a flutter. Kate was still more affected by the reception: for, knowing that the Brothers were acquainted with all that had passed between her and Frank, she felt her position

a most delicate and trying one, and was trembling on the arm of Nicholas, when Mr. Charles took her in his, and led her to another part of the room.

"Have you seen Madeline, my dear?" he said, "since she left your house?"

"No, sir!" replied Kate. "Not once."

"And not heard from her either, eh? Not heard from her?"

"I have had only one letter," rejoined Kate, gently. "I thought she would not have forgotten me quite so soon."

"Ah!" said the old man, patting her on the head, and speaking as affectionately as if she had been his favorite child. "Poor dear! What do you think of this, brother Ned? Madeline has only written to her once, only once, Ned, and she didn't think she would have forgotten her quite so soon, Ned."

"Oh! sad, sad; very sad!" said Ned.

The Brothers interchanged a glance, and looking at Kate for a little time without speaking, shook hands, and nodded as if they were congratulating each other on something very delightful.

"Well, well," said brother Charles, "go into that room, my dear—that door yonder—and see if there's not a letter for you from her. I think there's one upon the table. You needn't hurry back, my love, if there is, for we don't dine just yet, and there's plenty of time. Plenty of time."

Kate retired as she was directed. Brother Charles, having followed her graceful figure with his eyes, turned to Mrs. Nickleby, and said:

"We took the liberty of naming one hour before the real dinner hour because we had a little business to speak about, which would occupy the interval. Ned, my dear fellow, will you mention what we have agreed upon? Mr. Nickleby, sir, have the goodness to follow me."

Without any further explanation, Mrs. Nickleby, Miss La Creevy, and brother Ned were left alone together, and Nicholas followed brother Charles into his private room; where, to his great astonishment he encountered Frank, whom he supposed to be abroad.

"Young men," said Mr. Cheeryble, "shake hands."

"I need no bidding to do that," said Nicholas, extending his.

"Nor I," rejoined Frank, as he clasped it heartily.

The old gentleman thought that two handsomer or finer young fellows could scarcely stand side by side than those to whom he now looked with so much pleasure. Suffering his eyes to rest upon them for a short time in silence, he said, while he seated himself at his desk.

"I wish you to be friends—close, firm friends—and if I thought you otherwise, I should hesitate in what I am about to say. Frank, look here! Mr. Nickleby, will you come on the other side?"

The young men stepped up on either side of brother Charles, who produced a paper from his desk, and unfolded it.

"This, he said, "is a copy of the will of Madeline's maternal grandfather, bequeathing her the sum of twelve thousand pounds payable either upon her coming of age or marrying. It would appear that this gentleman, angry with her (his only relation) because she would not put herself under his protection, and detach herself from the society of her father in compliance with his repeated overtures, made a will leaving this property (which was all he possessed) to a charitable institution. He would seem to have repented this determination however, for, three weeks afterwards, and in the same month, he executed this. By some fraud, it was abstracted immediately after his decease, and the other—the only will found—was proved and administered. Friendly negotiations, which have only just now terminated, have been proceeding since this instrument came into our hands, and, there is no doubt of its authenticity, and the witnesses have been discovered (after some trouble), the money has been refunded. Madeline has, therefore, obtained her right, and is, or will be when either of the contingencies which I have mentioned has arisen, mistress of this fortune. You understand me?"

Frank replied in the affirmative. Nicholas, who could not trust himself to speak lest his voice should be heard to falter, bowed his head.

"Now, Frank," said the old gentleman, "the fortune is but a small

one; but we love Madeline, and such as it is, we would rather see you allied to her with that, than to any other girl we know who has three times the money. Will you become a suitor for her hand?"

"No, sir. I had the idea that her hand was already pledged to one who has a thousand times the claims upon her gratitude, and, if I mistake not, upon her heart, than I or any other man can ever urge. In this it seems I judged hastily."

"As you always do, sir," cried brother Charles, utterly forgetting his assumed dignity, "as you always do. How dare you think, Frank, that we would have you marry for money, when youth, beauty, and every amiable virtue and excellence were to be had for love? How dared you, Frank, go and make love to Mr. Nickleby's sister without telling us first what you meant to do, and letting us speak for you?"

"I hardly dared to hope—"

"You hardly dared to hope! Then, so much the greater reason for having our assistance! Mr. Nickleby, sir, Frank, although he judged hastily, judged for once, correctly. Madeline's heart is occupied. Give me your hand, sir; it is occupied by you, and worthily and naturally. This fortune is destined to be yours, but you have a greater fortune in her, sir, than you would have in money were it forty times told. She chooses you, Mr. Nickleby. She chooses as we, her dearest friends, would have her choose. Frank chooses as we would have him choose. He should have your sister's little hand, sir, if she had refused it a score of times; ay, he should, and he shall! You acted nobly, not knowing our sentiments, but now you know them, sir, you must do as you are bid. What! You are the children of a worthy gentleman! The time was, sir, when my dear brother Ned and I were two poor, simple-hearted boys, wandering, almost barefoot, to seek our fortunes; are we changed in anything but years and worldly circumstances since that time? No, God forbid! Oh, Ned, Ned, Ned, what a happy day this is for you and me! If our poor mother had only lived to see us now, Ned, how proud it would have made her dear heart at last!"

Thus apostrophized, brother Ned, who had entered with Mrs. Nickleby, and who had been before unobserved by the young men, darted forward, and fairly hugged brother Charles in his arms

"Bring in my little Kate," said the latter, after a short silence. "Bring her in, Ned. Let me see Kate, let me kiss her. I have a right to do so now; I was very near it when she first came; I have often been very near it. Ah! Did you find the letter, my bird? Did you find Madeline herself, waiting for you and expecting you? Did you find that she had not quite forgotten her friend, and nurse, and sweet companion? Why, this is almost the best of all!"

"Come, come," said Ned, "Frank will be jealous, and we shall have some cutting of throats before dinner."

"Then let him take her away, Ned, let him take her away. Madeline's in the next room. Let all the lovers get out of the way, and talk among themselves, if they've anything to say. Turn 'em out, Ned, every one!"

Brother Charles began the clearance by leading the blushing girl to the door, and dismissing her with a kiss. Frank was not very slow to follow, and Nicholas had disappeared first of all. So there only remained Mrs. Nickleby and Miss La Creevy, who were both sobbing heartily; the two brothers, and Tim Linkinwater, who now came in to shake hands with everybody, his round face all radiant and beaming with smiles.

"Well, Tim Linkinwater, sir," said brother Charles, who was always spokesman, "now the young folks are happy, sir."

"You didn't keep 'em in suspense as long as you said you would, though," returned Tim, archly. "Why, Mr. Nickleby and Frank were to have been in your room for I don't know how long; and I don't know what you weren't to have told them before you came out with the truth."

"Now did you ever know such a villain as this, Ned?" said the old gentleman, "did you ever know such a villain as Tim Linkinwater? He accusing me of being impatient, and he the very man who has been wearying us morning, noon, and night, and torturing

us for leave to go and tell 'em what was in store, before our plans were half complete, or we had arranged a single thing. A treacherous dog."

"So he is, brother Charles," returned Ned, "Tim is a treacherous dog. Tim is not to be trusted. Tim is a wild young fellow. He wants gravity and steadiness; he must sow his wild oats, and then perhaps he'll become in time a respectable member of society."

This being one of the standing jokes between the old fellows and Tim, they all three laughed very heartily, and might have laughed much longer, but the Brothers, seeing that Mrs. Nickleby was laboring to express her feelings, and was really overwhelmed by the happiness of the time, took her between them, and led her from the room under pretense of having to consult her on some most important arrangements.

Now Tim and Miss La Creevy had met very often, and had always been very chatty and pleasant together—had always been great friends—and consequently it was the most natural thing in the world that Tim, finding that she still sobbed, should endeavor to console her. As Miss La Creevy sat on a large old-fashioned window-seat where there was ample room for two, it was also natural that Tim should sit down beside her; and as to Tim's being unusually spruce and particular in his attire that day, why it was a high festival and a great occasion, and that was the most natural thing to do of all.

Tim sat down beside Miss La Creevy, and, crossing one leg over the other so that his foot—he had very comely feet, and happened to be wearing the neatest shoes and black silk stockings possible—should come easily within the range of her eye, said in a soothing way:

"Don't cry!"

"I must," rejoined Miss La Creevy.

"No, don't," said Tim. Please don't; pray don't."

"I am so happy!" sobbed the little woman.

"It's almost enough to make *us* get married, after all, isn't it?" said Tim.



Tim Linkinwater proposes to Miss La Creevy —Page 133

"Oh, nonsense!" replied Miss La Creevy, laughing. "We are too old."

"Not a bit," said Tim, "we are too old to be single. Why should not we both be married, instead of sitting through the long winter evenings by our solitary firesides? Why shouldn't we make one fireside of it, and marry each other?"

"Oh, Mr. Linkinwater, you're joking."

"No, no, I'm not. I'm not indeed," said Tim. "I will, if you will. Do, my dear."

"It would make people laugh so."

"Let 'em laugh," cried Tim, stoutly, "we have good tempers I know, and we'll laugh too. Why, what hearty laughs we have had since we've known each other!"

"So we have," cried Miss La Creevy, giving away a little, as Tim thought.

"It has been the happiest time in all my life; at least, away from the counting-house and Cheeryble Brothers," said Tim. "Do, my dear! Now say you will."

"No, no, we must not think of it," returned Miss La Creevy. "What would the Brothers say?"

"Why, God bless your soul!" cried Tim innocently, "you don't suppose I should think of such a thing without their knowing it! Why, they left us here on purpose."

Five minutes after this honest and straightforward speech, little Miss La Creevy and Tim were talking as pleasantly as if they had been married for a score of years, and had never once quarrelled all the time; and five minutes after that, when Miss La Creevy had bustled out to see if her eyes were red and to put her hair to rights, Tim moved with a stately step towards the drawing-room, exclaiming as he went, "There ain't such another woman in all London! I *know* there ain't!"

By this time the butler was nearly in fits, in consequence of the unheard-of postponement of dinner. Nicholas, who had been occupied in a manner in which every reader may imagine for himself or

herself, was hurrying down stairs in obedience to his angry summons, when he encountered a new surprise.

On his way down he overtook in one of the passages a stranger genteelly dressed in black, who was also moving towards the dining-room. As he was rather lame and walked slowly, Nicholas lingered behind, and was following him step by step, wondering who he was, when he suddenly turned round and caught him by both hands.

"Newman Noggs!" cried Nicholas joyfully.

"Ah! Newman, your own Newman, your own faithful Newman! My dear boy, my dear Nick, I give you joy—health, happiness, every blessing! I can't bear it; it's too much, my dear boy—it makes a child of me!"

"Where have you been?" said Nicholas, "what have you been doing? How often have I inquired for you, and been told that I should hear before long!"

"I know, I know," returned Newman. "They wanted all the happiness to come together. I've been helping 'em."

Newman had indeed rendered great assistance in bringing about the important disclosures that had been made. As Brooker had mentioned in his confession, it was through Newman that he had been enabled to make his revelation of Smike's true parentage; and Newman's opportunities for watching the proceedings of Ralph and Arthur Gride, had placed within his reach the necessary clews for the recovery of the will of Madeline's grandfather.

"You would never let me do that," said Nicholas in a tone of gentle reproach, as he glanced at Newman's attire.

"I didn't mind what I was then. I shouldn't have had the heart to put on gentleman's clothes. They would have reminded me of old times and made me miserable. I am another man now, Nick. My dear boy, I can't speak. Don't say anything to me. Don't think the worse of me for these tears. You don't know what I feel to-day; you can't and never will!"

They walked in to dinner, arm-in-arm, and sat down side by side. Never was such a dinner as that, since the world began. When

the first novelty of the meeting had worn off, and they began truly to feel how happy they were, the conversation became general, and the harmony and pleasure if possible increased. The Brothers were in a perfect ecstasy; and their insisting on saluting the ladies all round, before they would permit them to retire, gave occasion to the superannuated bank clerk to say so many good things that he quite out-shone himself, and was looked upon as a prodigy of humor.

"Kate, my dear," said Mrs. Nickleby, taking her daughter aside, as soon as they got up stairs, "you don't really mean to tell me that this is actually true about Miss La Creevy and Mr. Linkinwater?"

"Indeed it is, mamma."

"Why I never heard such a thing in my life!" exclaimed Mrs. Nickleby.

"Mr. Linkinwater is a most excellent creature," reasoned Kate, "and for his age, quite young still."

"For *his* age, my dear!" returned Mrs. Nickleby. "Yes; nobody says anything against him, except that I think he is the weakest and most foolish man I ever knew. It's *her* age I speak of. That he should have gone and offered himself to a woman who must be—ah, half as old again as I am—and that she should have dared to accept him! It don't signify, Kate: I'm disgusted with her!"

Shaking her head very emphatically indeed, Mrs. Nickleby swept away; and all the evening, in the midst of the merriment and enjoyment that ensued, and in which with that exception she freely participated, conducted herself towards Miss La Creevy in a stately and distant manner, designed to mark her sense of the impropriety of her conduct, and to signify her extreme and cutting disapprobation of the misdemeanor she had so flagrantly committed.



The children at Smike's grave — Page 137

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CONCLUSION

HEN her term of mourning had expired, Madeline gave her hand and her fortune to Nicholas; and on the same day and at the same time, Kate became Mrs. Frank Cheeryble. It was expected that Tim Linkinwater and Miss La Creevy would have made a third couple on the occasion, but they declined. Two or three weeks afterwards they went out together one morning before breakfast, and, coming back with merry faces, were found to have been quietly married that day.

The money which Nicholas acquired in right of his wife, he invested in the firm of Cheeryble Brothers, in which Frank had become a partner. Before many years elapsed, the business began to be carried on in the names of "Cheeryble and Nickleby," so that Mrs. Nickleby's prophetic anticipations were realized at last.

The twin brothers retired. Who needs to be told that *they* were happy? They were surrounded by happiness of their own creation, and lived but to increase it.

Tim Linkinwater condescended, after much entreaty and brow-beating, to accept a share in the house; but he could never be prevailed upon to suffer the publication of his name as a partner, and always persisted in the punctual and regular discharge of his clerkly duties.

He and his wife lived in the old house, and occupied the very bed-chamber in which he had slept for four and forty years. As his wife grew older, she became even more cheerful and light-hearted a little creature; and it was a common saying among their friends, that it was impossible to say which looked the happier, Tim as he sat calmly

smiling in his elbow-chair on one side of the fire, or his brisk little wife chatting and laughing and constantly bustling in and out of hers on the other.

Ralph, having died intestate, and having no relations but those with whom he had lived in such enmity, they would have become in legal course his heirs. But they could not bear the thought of growing rich on money so acquired, and felt as though they could never hope to prosper with it. They made no claim to his wealth, and the riches for which he had toiled all his days and burdened his soul with so many evil deeds, were at last all swept into the coffers of the state and no man was the better or the happier for them.

The first act of Nicholas, when he became a rich and prosperous merchant, was to buy his father's old house. As time crept on, and there came gradually about him a group of lovely children, it was altered and enlarged; but none of the old rooms were ever pulled down, no old trees were ever rooted up, nothing with which there was any association of bygone times was ever removed or changed.

Within a stone's throw was another retreat, enlivened by children's pleasant voices too; and there was Kate, with many new cares and occupations, and many new faces courting her sweet smile (and one so like her own, that to her mother she seemed a child again), the same true, gentle creature, the same fond sister, the same in the love of all about her, as in her girlish days.

Mrs. Nickleby lived, sometimes with her daughter, and sometimes with her son, accompanying one or the other of them to London at those periods when the cares of business obliged both families to live there, and always preserving a great appearance of dignity, and relating her experiences (especially on points connected with the management and bringing-up of children) with much solemnity and importance. It was a very long time before she could be induced to receive Mrs. Linkinwater into favor, and it is even doubtful whether she ever thoroughly forgave her.

There was one gray-haired, quiet, harmless gentleman, who, winter and summer, lived in a little cottage hard by Nicholas' house, and,

when Nicholas was not there, assumed the superintendence of affairs. His chief pleasure and delight was in the children, with whom he was a child himself, and master of the revels. The little people could do nothing without dear Newman Noggs.

The grass was green above the dead boy's grave, and trodden by feet so small and light, that not a daisy drooped its head beneath their pressure, Through all the spring and summer garlands of fresh flowers, wreathed by infant hands, rested on the stone; and when the children came to change them, lest they should wither and be pleasant to him no longer, their eyes filled with tears, and they spoke low and softly of their poor dead cousin.

THE END

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